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Germany's mix

Visa issues and the lack of a unified national body looking after the interests of the industry are hampering the incoming language travel market in Germany. Schools, however, are diversifying their product range to reach new students.

Staying current

With visa barriers hampering the development of some student markets, language schools in Germany have to update their courses in order to appeal to as wide a market as possible. Uwe Stränger from International House Prolog – Berlin says, "We decided to offer preparation courses for official exam dates all year round and we raised the number of social/cultural events from three-to-four/five times per week."

The school has also identified another area of potential growth in the future. "We will try to consolidate numbers or even increase them by more programmes designed for special purposes e.g. in reference to the special needs of the hospitality industry," says Stränger.

Other schools report that they are making their courses increasingly flexible. Kötting says, "For next year we are offering more start dates throughout the year for our long term and summer courses for over 18-year-olds and we do hope that this flexibility will increase the number of enrolments. We offer exam preparation courses, which are becoming more important and attract new students. Many students need an official certificate either for their job or to study at a German university."

Niels von Eisenhart Rother from S&W Training – Sprachen & Wirtschaft in Meersburg agrees that flexibility is key when attracting students to their school. "For our typical clients – mostly business managers – the most important selling point has been our total flexibility when it comes to time formats."

Hosting the Fifa World Cup in the summer of 2006 was definitely good for German language schools, with many reporting a boost in enrolments due to increased visitor numbers and a successful publicity campaign for the country.

Uwe Stränger from International House Berlin-Prolog reports that the benefits of the World Cup lasted long after the last match was played. "Although we thought that with the World Soccer Championship in 2006 we might have reached the peak of interest for German language courses, numbers of students increased even in 2007 by six-to-seven per cent," he says. "This might be still an effect of the publicity Germany gained last year."

While statistics showing the number and nationality of international students travelling to Germany to learn the language are not available, language schools in Germany generally report that the majority of their clients come from European countries. Niels von Eisenhart Rothe from S&W Training – Sprachen & Wirtschaft in Meersburg, a school specialising in courses for business executives, says that enrolments increased by about eight per cent in the first 10 months of 2007 and the UK and France are their top provider countries. He puts the increase in French students down to an "increasing awareness of [the] importance of the German language in European business" and adds, "The number of US clients are slowly but steadily recovering after the 2001 shock."

At Horizonte in Regensburg, students from the former Eastern bloc are starting to make their presence felt. Bernhard Friedl at the school says their fastest growing student nationality is Czech and adds, "[This is] not only by numbers, they are slowly starting to stay longer too." Other nationalities currently growing in numbers at Horizonte include students from the Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia, while numbers from Latin America "vary very much from year to year", says Freidl.

Student markets for German language schools are not solely confined to Europe, however. At International House Freiburg, Maria Kötting says, "We welcome students from all over the world, mostly from Europe – French and Italian speaking Switzerland, Italy, Spain etc – but we have students from Japan, China, Russia, Poland, the USA and South America." The school has, however, noticed a decline in the number of Scandinavian students in recent years, and puts this down to developments in the market. "I just spoke to an agent in Sweden and he recognised a decrease in numbers for all languages," says Kötting. "Many students went abroad looking for a job or other opportunities staying in a foreign country."

Growth in some student markets is also being hampered by continued difficulties in the visa application process for certain nationalities. In our previous Market Report on Germany, schools highlighted the fact that Chinese students have to undertake their visa interview in German, thereby preventing those with low levels



PHOTOGRAPH: GERMAN NATIONAL TOURIST BOARD

of German entering the country to learn the language (see LTM, May 2007, page 35). In 2007, visa problems were still creating a significant barrier for student from some countries. Stränger confirms, "The lowest numbers we receive are from countries with problems in terms of receiving visas e.g. China and central Asia."

Ulli Schmidt from Friedländer-Schule in Berlin agrees and says that overall student numbers have stagnated compared with the previous year. "Still the problem is that a lot of students do not get visas because of the strict German – and EU – visa policy," he says.

The lack of a national association representing the interests of language schools surely exacerbates this issue as schools are unable to put their views across to the government and initiate change. However, one school notes that they have had some success in dealing with the visa issuing authorities recently. Kötting relates, "Sometimes we contact the German embassies/visa departments explaining and confirming the language programme and often they have accepted and issued a visa permit for the students," she says.

While German language schools are unable to reap the benefits of national association membership, Friedl says that enrolments have definitely grown since his school became a member of the international language school association, Ialc. "We had lots of new contacts," he says. "Some very good agencies keep sending us more enrolments every year due to the feedback they get from students who are very satisfied with the quality of teaching, the commitment of the teachers, the atmosphere in the school and the on-site residence."