

South Africa rises

Aided by South Africa's weak currency and its growing international popularity as a mainstream tourism destination, the country's English language teaching industry has experienced steady growth in recent years, and it may well gain from a slowdown in student demand for the USA. GILLIAN POOLE reports.

The South African English language teaching industry is benefiting from a snowball effect: the more students that study there, the more subsequent enrolments schools receive, as noted by Jane Diesel at Inlingua Cape Town. "[We are receiving] more referrals as we had more students [in 2000] than the previous year," she reports.

Luanne McCallum, Director of Education and Studies at Interlink School of Languages, agrees. "[Interlink] has been established for longer now and has definitely earned a good reputation. Our main [student] increases have been due to word-of-mouth recommendations."

Most English language schools in the country have experienced a steady growth in student numbers in recent years. McCallum says enrolments were "good" in 1999, "better" in 2000, and the "best" in 2001. And she adds that they are looking very good for early 2002.

This favourable growth looks set to continue, particularly with the low value of the South African rand making study in the country comparatively cheap. In addition, the growth of South Africa as a tourist destination has spread the word about the attractions of the country and also helped language schools recruit students from a wider range of countries.

Germany and Switzerland remain two major student provider countries, but other countries are gaining in importance. "Student numbers from non-German speaking markets are increasing as South Africa becomes well known in other countries as well," says Alexander Kratochwil of Good Hopes Studies. He lists Brazilians among the most important student nationalities, as well as Spanish and Italian students. Diesel also documents "increased



interest from Spanish speakers in Europe and South America", while McCallum sites an increase in students from neighbouring African countries.

Many language schools in South Africa have broadened their range of courses to incorporate specific business and academic preparation courses, thereby widening their target markets with great success. "We have developed an excellent business English programme," says Mark van Niekerk of One World Language School in Cape Town. "We have established links with universities and business colleges to achieve this, and we will continue to develop along these lines."

According to Karl Rutti, Managing Director of Cape Communication Centre, this market trend has affected the average student age. "The average age of students has become older," he reports. "The older students tend to study on our popular business English course. We also receive students who need to improve their English before going on to universities here in Cape Town."

In addition, the average length of stay is increasing, says McCallum. "Students seem to be coming for longer lengths of time, looking for better qualifications, rather than two-week general English/holiday stays," she says.

Nevertheless, South Africa remains popular with vacation learners. "[We have experienced] increased interest in our travelling classroom [course]," relates Diesel, "where students travel to Namibia with a teacher and a tour guide." The market remains highly seasonal, with students generally choosing to study between October and March, when the weather is driest.

McCallum reports a slight shift in this trend. "We have seen a change over the past two years, in that the biggest numbers [of students] are now seeming to come through early in the year – January, February and March, rather than October, November and December, which used to be the trend," she says. "Also, our winter months have improved, in that we have more longer term students staying and continuing their studies over the winter."

Despite the general decline in tourism around the world owing to the terrorist attacks in the USA last year, and the subsequent military action in Afghanistan and unrest elsewhere, the English language industry in South Africa remains positive. "South Africa is a top destination throughout the world travel market and, of course, our very attractive [currency] exchange rates are also a big seller," concludes Rutti.

Selling the South Africa experience

In the past, South Africa's tourism industry has laboured under negative press about its crime rate. However, sources in the country report that crime levels have improved, and since the terrorist attacks in the USA, the pendulum seems to have swung in South Africa's favour.

"The [terrorist attacks] in the USA have made Cape Town an attractive alternative for certain nationalities," says Mark van Niekerk of One World Language School. The tourism industry is expecting a rise in the number of visitors, particularly from Europe, as they seek destinations away from potential trouble spots.

However, poor flight connections to the country have hampered growth in the past. The situation may worsen in the near future, as airlines look towards cutting costs by axing their less popular routes.

On the up side, the rand fell still further after the events in the USA last September. By October 2001, the rand had depreciated by 15.9 per cent, making the destination even more attractive to tourists and language travellers. The instability of the rand has led Cape Studies language school to offer its prices in euros from this year. In this way, says Jens von Wichingen, "We are able to keep our prices constant."

However, the drop in value of the country's currency has made it difficult for language schools to market themselves overseas. Jane Diesel at Inlingua Cape Town says that overseas agent workshops and exhibitions are "way out of our budget". She comments that the South African tourist board, Satour, should support the industry more. "They seem reluctant to accept that the potential is huge and well worth investing in."

At Cape Communication Centre, Karl Rutti reinforces the importance of using agents in a marketing strategy. "We use good quality agents and are always looking at joint marketing ventures," he says.

He adds that his school is purposely pitching itself against other major English-speaking destinations. "We have been targeting [countries] that predominantly [send students to] the USA and the UK."