

Staying on track

There are many reminders that there are challenges to face in the language travel industry, not least the tense new operating environment that has emerged since September 11 and the subsequent call in the USA for stricter visa procedures.

It is not all bad news, although the present business climate does call for cooperation and understanding from all involved in the industry. As the President of AAIEP in the USA points out, stricter visa procedures, for example, may lead to a more positive perception about the level of safety in the USA (pages 26-30). It is now apparent that the US student visa system lacked critical resources and infrastructure, and the call for more stringent visa procedures for students entering the USA – and greater financial support for immigration services – is being backed by many members of the US education industry (page 7).

When confidence levels return to pre-September 11 days, there may indeed be a boom in student demand for study abroad, as those who have postponed their plans decide to continue with their study intentions after all. In the meantime, as some agents point out, it is crucial to develop contingency plans, and to continue making efforts to attract clients (page 35). Other challenges that lie ahead for agents are largely as a result of market growth, albeit with a temporary blip. For example, one agent points to the mass of information now available at international education fairs, and the need to disseminate this information in a useful way (page 35).

Any new regulations always bring with them a fresh challenge, as in Hungary, where new travel agency regulations have spurred a group of agents into forming a national association – in part, so that they can campaign to have language travel agents recognised under a separate legal classification (page 14). This month also sees the introduction of the euro currency in many European Union member states, which will slightly alter the operating environment for agents both within and outside of the EU (page 13).

In Canada, a change in regulations to allow students to enter the country for up to six months without a student authorisation, which it is hoped will be introduced in the near future, will be a positive turn of events for the education industry (pages 26-30). And other countries also have reasons to look forward to the new year. South Africa, for example, which is growing in popularity as a study destination, looks set to win more students, as sources there forecast that a shift in demand for language courses outside of the USA may aid further market growth in their country (page 23). In Australia and New Zealand, schools are also hopeful that they may benefit from the perception of their countries as safe destinations (page 7).

With pressure on students to gain marketable qualifications, however, all countries should look forward to continued market growth. In Thailand, agents testify that most students have not cancelled their study plans, and many predict business as usual this year (pages 16-17). And in Taiwan and China, the pressure on students is increasing, as many university-level students will now be expected to sit listening and speaking language tests, as part of a drive to enhance language skills among their citizens (pages 6-7).

Cooperation between agencies and schools, which will help rebuild, or capitalise on, the current state of the study abroad market, will be crucial in the months ahead. Schools should also be minded to keep track of the latest teaching developments, as computer-aided language learning, for example, looks set to gain currency among students as a highly relevant language learning process (page 37).

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