



close examination

The language travel industry can fulfil its potential and extend its reach across the globe, if national governments are compliant with this aim and facilitate the entry of overseas students into their country. Over recent years, a number of countries have woken up to the actual, and potential, economic contribution of the international education industry, and have, accordingly, put policies in place aimed at supporting its development. Yet, now, in the wake of the events of September 11 2001 in the USA, it seems that a new approach to immigration may be called for. JANE VERNON SMITH reports.



When language travel first started to take off as an industry back in the 1960s, visas were less of an issue; schools cast their nets much less wide in recruiting their students, and students were less willing to consider long-haul destinations for their studies. In the 21st century, however, language schools, working with agents around the world, are quick to exploit the potential of emerging markets on all sides of the globe. Countries like Colombia, Russia and China have become a major source of students, and visa policy is, therefore, a critical factor in determining which destination wins business from which source country.

According to agents, the visa situation in respect of potential student destinations can exercise a strong influence on choice. Marcos Londe of the Brazilian agency, Activa Intercambio Internacional, reports that visa issues “strongly affect” a student’s decision. And Larissa Evdokimova, Manager of Ekaterinburg Centre for Education Abroad in Russia, points out, “There is a great demand for learning English in Malta among

our students because of [the country’s] very easy visa procedure.”

Student choice can also work the other way. As Nalinee Dannapha of Thai agency, Study Overseas, explains, students will try to avoid applying to countries where it is likely to be difficult to obtain a study visa. Indeed, in extreme cases, visa difficulties can potentially lead to the loss of an entire market. Sedat Eren, Marketing Manager of Advis Educational Counselling in Turkey, highlights the current situation in Turkey for entry into Canada, where there is a high rate of visa refusal. In 2001, it rose to as much as 55 per cent for short-term programmes.

At the same time, Eren points out, more than half of the applicants who are refused a visa for Canada are successful in obtaining student visas from other countries. “[Canada] will lose its market in Turkey,” he asserts. “Some agents [have already stopped] selling Canadian schools.”

Refusal is rooted in a number of fears: that students may not have the necessary finances to see them through their course; that they may not return to their home country afterwards; or that they may apply for asylum once they have gained entry to a study destination. Reports that one of the hijackers who carried out the terrorist attacks on September 11 entered the USA on a student visa add further fuel to such concerns, ensuring that this problem is not about to go away.

However, not all visa issues are of such magnitude. Delay in processing is also a commonly cited problem in many countries. This can be due to a number of reasons. Shelley Johnson, of Shane English School in South Africa, blames “the unreliable postal service” for many of their problems. In New Zealand, Joan Boyer, Head of the International School of English Language at Christchurch Polytechnic, cites “lack of complete information from the applicant to the immigration office”, while Hubert Koetter of Did Deutsch-Institut in Germany points to overburdened officials in visa departments and relevant offices responsible for the granting of visas.

Lack of overseas visa offices is a real problem for Canadian language schools. “Students shouldn’t have to apply at embassies in other countries and be treated as if they were compatriots of that country, for example, [processing] all Europe through Paris,” complains Virginia Christopher of the Canadian language schools association, Pelsa.

According to Christopher, a further problem affecting students is “inconsistently applied policies in most countries”. In the USA, UCIEP President, Scott

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Stevens, reports similar frustrations. “Sometimes,” he says, “it is simply a matter of the attitude of the particular consular. When the lead consular official left Japan about two years ago, the visa problems some programmes were having disappeared immediately.”

Problems such as these persist despite the fact that a number of countries have carried out extensive revision of their visa policies over recent years. Indeed, reforms are ongoing, and many language travel organisations, such as AAIEP and UCIEP in the USA, Education New Zealand, English Australia and the UK’s Arels, work closely with their governments concerning immigration issues. Such is the importance of visa issues that international organisations too, such as Alto and Gaela, have become involved, sharing information and adding their weight in support of the lobbying efforts of national associations.

According to Gaela spokesperson, Jan Capper, Gaela – the fledgling global alliance of education and language associations – is bent upon playing a role in encouraging the wider adoption or adaptation of successful visa models, thereby putting its members in a better position to lobby their governments.

One country that has been at the forefront of reforms, and sometimes seen as a role model for others, is New Zealand. John Sargent of New Zealand’s education providers’ association, Education

New Zealand, stresses that the New Zealand Immigration Service (NZIS) has changed its philosophy from that of gate-keeper to that of encouraging and facilitating entry to New Zealand. Not that this means it is being less discriminating. The aim is “to establish borders that are invisible and secure”.

The country has introduced a range of measures, which include the establishment of facilities for the electronic submission of visa applications; new performance targets for responding to visa applications; visa waiver agreements with 50 countries; and the assignment of a specific person to liaise between the NZIS, Education New Zealand and the New Zealand Trade Development Board. Perhaps most significant, however, has been the establishment of a new “limited purposes” visa – which allows entry to the country only for the specific purpose named on the document. It is non-transferable, thereby waiving the right to any potential claim to refugee status from students from high-risk countries.

Meanwhile, in the UK, the Blair initiative – designed to increase the country’s share of the international education market – paved the way for a new visa-issuing strategy, which Arels’ Chief Executive, Tony Millns, says has been “a major step forward”. Among the areas targeted for improvement were information and advice for applicants; processing times; and collaboration between visa offices and British Council staff in key and problem markets, such as Russia and China.

Problem areas for language teaching destinations

Visa problems would not be such a cause for frustration, were they experienced only by applicants from markets considered as “minor” for the language travel industry. However, the fact is that, in many cases, the countries experiencing the greatest difficulties in obtaining visas tend to be those that offer the greatest potential – Eastern Europe and China being prime examples.

Greg Nisbet, President of Village English in Canada, puts the issue in context. “I would say that over the past three years we have lost approximately US\$85,000 in sales per year due to visa refusals,” he estimates. “China has always been a sore point for Canadian ESL

providers, as it is virtually impossible for [the] Chinese to get a student visa for a stand-alone [English language] course.” Colombia and Turkey are also highlighted by Nisbet as sources of difficulty.

In the case of China, students are now able to gain entry into New Zealand, because of the new limited purposes visa recently introduced there. Meanwhile, Japanese and Brazilians can now enter the country visa-free and study for up to 12 weeks, as Joan Boyer at Christchurch Polytechnic points out. “[Students that] are most often refused visas,” she says, “[are from] India, Pakistan and the Middle East.”

This is in contrast to the situation in Australia, where Chris Magill, Principal of Magill College, highlights Chinese and Slovak students as those most likely to encounter difficulties. This, as she points out, is on account of the fact that they often need to work to support themselves.

Like Canada, the UK presents difficulties for Turkish students. “It seems very difficult for Turkish applicants to satisfy the embassy officials in Istanbul,” comments Tony Eke, Director of UK-based Intensive School of English. He says that, aside from the usual concerns about intentions to return home afterwards, he has come

across reasons for refusal ranging from “English not good enough” to “English so good they don’t need to study further”.

Meanwhile, at the United States International University in the USA, which Heiko Floegel admits is “dependent strongly” on student visas, he also reports high visa rejection rates for students from Eastern European, Middle Eastern and sometimes South American countries.

While New Zealand is proving a more viable alternative to many other English-speaking destinations, South Africa is another market that could gain business from its competitors. According to

Vivi van Ketel of Cape Studies Language School, Eastern Europeans don’t have any problems in obtaining a visa there, although Shelley Johnson, of Shane English School, points out that students can suffer delays of up to three months.

Beyond the English-speaking world, Hubert Koetter of Did Deutsch Institut in Germany reports no major problems, while in Spain, by contrast, Malaca Instituto’s Bob Burger highlights Korea, mainland China, Russia and other ex-Soviet states as problem areas. Despite this, he is unequivocal about the way forward: “The future of the Spanish market lies in Korea, China and Russia.”

In fact, visa procedures have been under scrutiny in most of the major English language markets and elsewhere, although moves have not always been perceived as helpful to the education industry. In a straw poll of agents, the USA – nominated by agents in Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brazil, Russia, Bangladesh and Turkey – emerged decisively as the country for which it is most difficult to obtain a visa. Australia was in second place, followed by Canada.

The situation in Canada looks set to improve in the near future, following lobbying by the language school sector over a number of years. According to the CEC (Canadian Education Centres) Network, it appears that the Canadian government intends to proceed with legislation allowing students to enter Canada for six instead of three months without a student authorisation; it is also expected to expand this category from language study programmes to all education programmes.

Prospective reforms in the USA have a different slant, as Peter Thomas, President-Elect of AAIEP, points out. “US visa regulations are tough because so many people want to come here and stay here and, so long as that is the case – as long as the demand is strong – our sector will prosper in the long run.”

The Cipris scheme (now known as the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, SEVP) was designed in 1997 to modernise and streamline the process by which foreign students were brought into the USA. An Internet-based scheme, its emphasis was upon providing better monitoring, rather than upon making it easier for students to gain entry to the country.

In light of the terrorist attacks, the scheme, which has been trialled in the country, is expected to be introduced shortly, and members of the US industry have withdrawn their opposition to it (see *Language Travel Magazine*, December 2001, page 6). The requirement of a US\$100 fee as part of the scheme, payable by students prior to applying for a visa, further reinforces the view of many that the USA is the most difficulty country to gain entry to.

Meanwhile, the Australian immigration system is applauded by Danny Chang, Manager of the Education Foundation of Europe agency in Taiwan. “I will say Australia has contributed a lot of time and effort to reduce the timing and processing work for visa application. It is the easiest country to apply for visas, from my viewpoint,” he says. However, the initiative taken in Australia last year to overhaul the student visa system caused some consternation (see *Language*

Travel Magazine, September 2001, pages 6-7). This move involved tougher language and financial tests for students classified as “high risk”, and it is expected to result in an overall reduction in student numbers from some countries.

“[Students now] need IELTS [level] 5.5,” says Dao Thi Lien Huong of Quoc Anh IEC Co in Vietnam. She points out that this means students have to study English at home first, thereby reducing the numbers who will go to Australia. Bangladeshi agent, Sumon Talukder of SS Business Corporation, has also felt the impact of the new policy. “Last year,” he comments, “our students [got] visas easily for Australia, but now, after July 2001, [it is] very difficult to get a visa.”

While this represents one side of the picture, the view from the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (Dima) is very different. “The new student visa requirements are expected to result in continued growth of overseas students to Australia, particularly from emerging markets,” asserts public affairs spokesperson, Nichola Cox. “Strengthening the system of processing student visas will ultimately result in more genuine students being attracted to study in Australia.”

Since September 11 last year, this view has rapidly been gaining currency in some quarters. Prior to that date, there often seemed to be a fundamental conflict of interests between, on the one hand, language schools and agents who wanted to be able to recruit as many students as possible, and government agents, on the other, whose duty it was to ensure that only bona fide applications were approved. Since then, however, there has been a growing realisation

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that it may actually be in all our interests that regulations be tightened, in order for immigration policy to continue to function normally in these current times.

This is, at any event, thought likely to be government policy in many countries. Millns in the UK points to the likelihood of heightened scrutiny for applicants from North Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet republics. And, at the time of researching this article, the issuing of visas had become more difficult for students trying to leave some Muslim

countries, such as Indonesia, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, according to Stevens in the USA. Meanwhile, Sargent explains, "The New Zealand visa office in Karachi, Pakistan, now has locked doors and is only accepting visa applications by mail."

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This may not have any major impact on the number of students entering New Zealand. By the same token, the student populace in North American schools is not likely to be greatly affected by this regional tightening of procedure. As Chris Musial, Director of Marketing at the International Language Institute in Canada, points out, statistically, 70 per cent of international students in North America come from Asia.

Nevertheless, it is a serious problem for students and agents from the countries concerned, and it could lead to increased numbers of students choosing to study in countries such as Malta, which Evdokimova identified as popular among Russian students. Since September 11, the situation in Turkey has been such that, with refusals reaching 70 to 80 per cent, it isn't even worth bothering to try for a visa for countries like the USA, UK and Canada, says Eren.

Confidence in immigration systems could, of course, deteriorate, and as an example, the US industry had to fight hard last year to block a proposal by Senator Feinstein for a six-month moratorium on student visa issuance (see page 6). Instead, the education industry favours a tightening of regulations to improve national security, accelerating the deployment of the SEVP tracking system, extending it to

include all non-immigrant visas, and improving the screening of visa applicants.

"What is needed," asserts Stevens, "is greater security, not fewer international students or more regulations – and that, I believe, is what will be the case. My hope is that the State Department will receive the funding it has needed for many years, to support more staffing in consular offices [in order] to provide background checks, the implementation of an electronic visa tracking system for all visa categories, and the hiring of more INS enforcement officers to pursue those who overstay their visas."

Stevens is of the opinion that it is not just the USA that needs to go down this route. "I believe," he says, "that in the wake of September 11, a number of countries, such as Canada and Great Britain, which have in recent years greatly streamlined the visa process, will find the need to revisit the [immigration] issue. I believe that, in the future months, international students will actually prefer those countries that put applicants through more careful screening prior to issuing visas. Such measures," he stresses, "will make international students feel more secure [about] their study abroad experience."

At the time of going to press, many were still considering their position on these matters. However, given the uncertainty surrounding the current international situation, the language travel industry needs to continue to be proactive, working with governments to come up with solutions that can incorporate optimum security, while at the same time protecting the interests of the international education industry. The consensus from the international grouping, Gaela, is that cooperation will be all the more important in the wake of September 11, to ensure that governments do not crack down on all student visas. For without visas, the industry will be severely stifled. □

Showing responsibility

One obvious way in which both individual language schools and agencies can sustain or improve visa issuance is by proving their responsibility.

In Spain, according to Bob Burger of Malaca Instituto, there is a feeling that it is much easier for students to get a visa to study at a public sector organisation than at a private language school. Burger believes that – despite much progress over recent years, with the introduction of the Ceele mark of quality accreditation – private language schools suffer from an outdated perception on the part of overseas Spanish consular officials that they are less

professional than public sector institutions.

However, he stresses, "Serious private language schools will control students' attendance in class, and they will inform the police if a student who entered on a visa does not attend classes." As he points out, it is in the interests of schools to do this, if they wish to recruit students from certain overseas markets.

In New Zealand, this type of approach has been made official. Restrictions on the entry of Chinese students "have been largely removed on the basis that institutions assume a greater responsibility for the quality and management of the students to whom they offer places", says John Sargent

at the association Education New Zealand.

Meanwhile, problems with visa refusals for students from India have also been gradually resolved in New Zealand, he claims, through the establishment of the India Export Network. This group of institutions (whose secretariat is provided by Education New Zealand) works closely with the New Zealand Immigration Service and Trade New Zealand in Delhi, together with a small number of "carefully selected" agents in India. "The process ensures as far as possible that student visas issued are for genuine students only," says Sargent.

As for agents and consultants, while many simply take the view that it is

best to avoid applying to certain countries for visas, Sigifredo Rodriguez of Studentvisa in Colombia is one who believes that agents have a responsibility too. "What we have to do is to be stricter in the selection of candidates and the documents to be presented," he says. "That way we can be more certain of a positive response."

The point here is that visas are not simply a problem for governments and applicants; they are crucial to the future of the language travel industry. Everyone working in the industry has a role to play in helping develop new measures that can ensure the continued healthy development of international education.