

Teenage learning

The junior/teenage sector of the language travel market is buoyant and becoming ever more sophisticated in an effort to tap into what these young clients want. AMY BAKER reports.

Youth programmes require an incredible amount of effort and attention, so volume is what makes them worthwhile," relates Sheila Hoffman-Hicks, President of Global Language Institute in St Paul, MN, in the USA, talking about the junior programmes that they have offered for many years.

At EC English Language Centre in St Julians, Malta, Morie Montanaro agrees. "Junior programmes have very different operational issues when compared with the adult market," she says. "Junior programmes are much more high maintenance in human resources; staff have to be available 24 hours a day and besides the educational

programme, schools have to provide an afternoon and evening leisure programme."

Schools active in this sector, however, acknowledge that they are teaching tomorrow's long-term clients and helping establish their school's reputation. And there are some operators that focus only on the junior sector. Anglophiles Academic in the UK is a case in point, and Jean-Philippe Morris, Managing Director, agrees with Hoffman-Hicks that volume of students makes up for the short-stay, seasonal nature of the market. "We put all our efforts exclusively into the junior market," he says. "We saw an increase on 2005 from 2004 of 17 per cent and we are projecting another increase for 2006 of around eight per cent."

Morris notes a change in the demands of today's junior clients, and their credit-card-wielding parents. They want more than the "classic" formula of tuition combined with sports and excursions. "We have answered this by offering more innovative and creative





Safety is also important to parents. "We have always placed a big emphasis on supervision and safety, but these days, the parents want even more assurances that their children will be taken care of," says Hoffman-Hicks. At EJO in the UK, Nicholas Lockstone says that this concern has translated into residential accommodation becoming more popular. "Parents have seen the family stay as providing a secure and homely environment but increasingly they see the residential course as being more secure."

The junior market, given underlying concerns for safety, continues to be characterised by a high proportion

of agency bookings. Montanaro in Malta explains that parents appreciate the extra assurances that booking through an agency can give. "EC recruits junior clients exclusively through agents," she relates. "Reputable agents can provide parents with the security of knowing that their child will be part of a larger group, sometimes with a group leader of their own nationality or a leader from the host country."

At ATC Language & Travel, O'Byrne relies on a similar high proportion of agency bookings. "We recruit our students through

programmes such as 'Music live'," he says, which offers sessions in a professional music college with recording studios, or English and hip hop, which gives students a taste of hip hop dance training alongside with language instruction.

In Ireland, Colm O'Byrne at ATC Language & Travel in Bray has also seen an increasing sophistication in course requirements. "Greater competition and a constant improvement in the standard of programmes available to junior students has raised their expectations," he says.

The needs of the junior clients, and the expectations of the parents, may differ somewhat. Michael Eck at STA Travel in Switzerland observes, "The juniors want fun and action, beach destinations are very popular for Swiss kids. The parents want their kids to study seriously and require a safe and friendly environment."

Some school representatives suggest that the parents' desires may be winning out.

Aisling Shiels at Emerald Cultural Institute in Dublin, Ireland reports, "Students are beginning to show more interest in exam preparation classes for their afternoon periods." And at Berlitz Language Centre in Vancouver, BC in Canada, Larry Rodney notes that juniors are increasingly "looking for more of a 'school' atmosphere rather than a 'camp' atmosphere focusing on fun".

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language travel agents," he says, indicating that business was steady in 2005 and that 2006 is already looking like it will be a strong year. "They account for 95 per cent of our junior business, the balance comes from referrals or local contacts."



Country choice

"Fortunately, new [student] markets appear each year and certainly, Eastern Europe and Asia have developed over the past few years and continue to do so," relates Colm O'Byrne at ATC Language & Travel in Ireland. He reports that for enrolments for residential junior programmes, most students tend to come from either Spain, Italy, France and Russia, while a wider range of countries promote junior home-stay programmes.

In the UK and Ireland, Western and Eastern European students tend to dominate enrolment tables, followed by Asian students. Nicholas Lockstone at EJO in the UK says, "We receive students from Europe and the Far East; very few at the moment from the Middle East and South America."

South Americans are more likely to choose the USA for a junior programme, based on the experience of Brenda Crivosei of Club del Trotamundo in Venezuela, while Sheila Hoffman-Hicks at Global Language Institute in the USA says that their main student markets are "Korea, Colombia, Taiwan and Kuwait".

In Canada, Simon MacMahon from Cornerstone Academic College also points to Koreans, Japanese, Mexicans and Brazilians as the biggest student nationalities "but we are seeing students from Europe and other South American countries", he adds. In Malta, Marie Montanaro at EC English Language Centres affirms that Western and Eastern European students are most numerous, although she points out that new markets in certain South American

and Asian countries "are beginning to show interest". At Cape Studies in South Africa, Manya Bredell at CapeTown School of English says students from the "Far East and South America" tend to dominate their programmes.

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, Angela Oliver at Unique New Zealand says young learners are predominantly from Korea, Thailand, or Taiwan, with most school groups from Japan. "Individuals have to be over 12 to get a student visa unless they come with their parent," she explains. In Germany, Martin Elbeshausen from Kultur Life agency testifies that the horizons of junior clients are expanding slowly in his experience, with more requests noted for long-haul and "exotic" destinations such as Australia, New Zealand and South America.

O'Byrne underlines that although price is important in the "highly competitive marketplace", trust is more so. "There are many many considerations – security, quality of programme, location, local contact person, international mix, price, age profile of students – but above all a parent must trust in who they are sending their child abroad with or to." Hoffman-Hicks agrees and adds that while all parents have to balance

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their budgets, "I think more and more parents are realising that sometimes you get what you pay for when it comes to youth programmes".

According to a number of schools, the junior season is becoming more diverse, with short programmes available over a longer period and for clients who are younger in age. Jesse Ro at American Language Communication Centre (ALCC) in New York City, USA, adds, "It seems like we have a lot more enquiries, especially for group junior programmes," while Sophie Colaco at Broadwater Education Centre in London,

ONT, Canada, agrees that in her experience, "the children are getting younger and younger".

This is also a trend noted by some agents. In Venezuela, Brenda Crivosei of Club del Trotamundo says that average client age is getting lower because parents are keen to invest in the future of their children. "Also," she adds, "since we have excellent camps inside Venezuela where kids go at a very young age, when they reach 10 or 11, parents think they are ready to go abroad to have fun while learning English or other languages."

Barbara Engler of Aktion Bildungsinformation in Germany and Eck in Switzerland see younger clients as a result of school system changes. "In Switzerland in some regions they start to have English lessons at about 10 or 12 years old, therefore we notice an increase in interest for a younger age group specifically for English," says Eck.

However, in Indonesia, Mark Effendi of Nexgen Educational says that the availability of English tuition at mainstream schools has had the reverse effect of making students study abroad at an older age. "This is also due to concern for the child's well being and the economy of Indonesia being not so good," he relates.

In Iceland and Russia, there has been no change in trends according to agencies there. But both Andrew Shuisky of Parta agency in Russia and Kristin Welding at Audur in Iceland emphasise that their reputation rides on the quality of the junior programmes they offer. Eck goes further in saying that some institutions do not take quality control seriously enough or acknowledge that teenagers are more mature and demanding than they were 15 years ago. He speaks for all in the industry when he says, "For us as an agency, it is crucial that teenagers have a good experience – they will think of us when they require our services for the launch of their career." ●