

Malta's wide reach

English language schools in Malta paint a positive picture of their market and believe its safe reputation will help win students from an increasing range of countries in 2002. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Although international student numbers in Malta – which experienced a double-digit increase in 2001 to total 45,000 – have been on a growth curve over the last decade or so, the intensification of competition both at home and overseas has resulted in many schools investing heavily in overseas marketing. Louiseanne Mercieca, Assistant to the Director of Studies at the English Language Academy in Sliema, puts their 15 per cent increase in student numbers in 2000 and 60 per cent increase in 2001 down to “stronger marketing”.

Andrew Mangion, Managing Director of the European Centre of English Language Studies in St Julians, also attributes their success at least in part to their marketing strategy. “During the last few years, our school has been increasing its [student] numbers at a steady pace due to customer satisfaction, marketing and sales efforts, [as well as] tremendous upgrades of school buildings and facilities,” he says.

A number of external factors have propelled Malta's international appeal, not least the September 11 events in the USA last year, which made students think carefully about their personal security when selecting a study destination. “[Immediately after the events] we had many questions on security,” reports Paul Fenech at Magister Academy in St Julians. “When Malta became perceived as a ‘safe destination’, [our numbers] went back to normal. The only difference [now] is that people confirm their bookings very much later than in the past – approximately two weeks prior to arrival.”

The perception of Malta as a safe destination is likely to have a positive effect on student numbers this year. “We are seeing a strong increase in bookings for



junior summer courses as agents seem to relocate groups from the UK and USA to Malta, which is perceived as a very safe destination,” says Mangion. “[This is] especially evident from our Italian, French and Spanish agents.”

Agents are crucial for most English language schools in Malta. According to the Status survey, conducted by *Language Travel Magazine*, 76 per cent of students in 2000 came through agents (see *Language Travel Magazine*, February 2002, page 44). “We rely heavily on agents in all our markets,” confirms Mangion. “We feel that they can do a much better job marketing our school in their countries than we could as they have the market knowledge of their country.”

“We firmly believe that students should go to language travel agents for advice on a language course abroad,” agrees Joe Aquilina of Clubclass Language School in St Andrews. However, because Clubclass is a relatively new school, Aquilina relates difficulties establishing relationships with agents in some markets.

“Agents in the developing markets are more receptive to our school, whereas some agents in established markets tend to be reluctant to send students to a fairly new school,” he says. Nevertheless, Aquilina predicts success in

2002 due to the school's activities with agents. “[We expect a] 25 per cent increase [in student numbers] in 2002,” he says, pointing to “increased marketing efforts with language travel agents”.

While Malta still attracts over 90 per cent of its students from Europe, many language schools are increasingly spreading their reach into other world regions, where, says Mangion, they have a very attractive selling point. “The fact that we have few students from a certain country makes it more attractive to agents [and] students from that country,” he says. “Asian students like the fact that they meet fewer Asian students in Malta when compared to other destinations.”

Aquilina confirms this trend. “The Chinese, Japanese and Korean markets are growing since agents from these countries are continuously seeking new [English-teaching] destinations that are not saturated with students of their same nationality.”

John Dimech, of the Institute of English Language Studies in Sliema, says discounts on long-stays are particularly attractive to Asian students. “A few years back, we introduced discounts as an incentive for 10-week stays and over,” he says. “We believe these kinds of incentives are very appealing to Asian countries.”

Host family standards

Malta has become the first country to regulate host family accommodation. The regulations, which are to come into effect shortly, ensure that host family accommodation complies with set standards, that the families have a good command of English and that students are in a safe environment.

The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) has been given the task of monitoring the standards in host families, a move that has been welcomed by schools throughout the country. “The fact that the MTA has taken over the regulation of host families is a step in the right direction,” says Joe Aquilina of Clubclass Language School, “because, with the human resource infrastructure it has at its disposal, the MTA will ensure that families meet or exceed international standards for hosting students.”

John Dimech, President of Feltom, the Maltese schools' association, stresses that, although the new regulations are certainly beneficial and necessary for the industry as a whole, they could present some problems in the near future. “We suspect that the introduction of the new regulations could possibly decrease the number of families,” he says. However, he adds, “If this is the price we have to pay to raise the quality, so be it. There is already a shortage of families but there is also a lack of national minimum standards, which is ultimately for the benefit of our agents and our mutual clients.”

Malta is also the only country in which the government stipulates compulsory minimum quality standards for English language schools. However, many sources believe that the government's EFL monitoring board falls short of its remit. “The board should primarily change from its civil servant mentality and adopt a more businesslike approach,” asserts Dimech at Feltom.