

Ireland's fluctuations

Growth of Ireland's English language teaching market has slowed in recent years and 2003 may well be tougher for the industry, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Growth in the number of English language students in Ireland has plateaued. On the one hand, the tightening of visa regulations for some countries, most notably China and Russia, and the strengthening of the euro made Ireland less attractive for certain nationalities, while on the other, better flight connections and marketing efforts from Irish language schools' association, MEI-Relsa, have enhanced the country's attractiveness for others. For schools, this meant a rather mixed performance in 2002.

'Our student numbers levelled off during 2002,' says Simon Gibson at the Irish College of English in Dublin. 'Due to the large inflow of Chinese in the past three years we did not take any more after February 2002.'

Another factor that has affected some schools is the downturn in the corporate market. 'Companies are not spending on intensive courses as they did in the past with the result that company-sponsored intensive courses are falling in numbers, especially from Germany and Italy,' explains Ernie Crossen from the Dublin School of English. Despite the drop in corporate clients, Crossen reports a 10 per cent increase in overall student numbers in 2002, which he puts down to Ireland's euro-zone membership and the school's special offers.

Student numbers at the Slaney Language Centre in Wexford have also been climbing, albeit slowly, over the past year. Lisa Bartsch at the school says this is mainly owing to the organic growth of the school itself: it has received official recognition, is benefiting from more word-of-mouth recommendations and has a growing team of agents. Eileen Leonard, Administration & Student Liaison Manager at



Overseas language study visitors to Ireland ('000)*

	1998	1999	2000	2001
Italy	31	33	37	36
Spain	28	29	25	26
France	27	25	22	22
Germany	12	12	12	12
Other Europe	11	12	13	13
Britain	4	3	3	2
North America	1	1	1	1
Other Areas	7	6	4	5
Total	120	121	118	118

*Over-16 year olds only - Source: Bord Fáilte

Holywell Language Centre in Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare, says they have also increased their contacts with agents, but even so, student numbers in 2002 did not do 'as well as expected' because 'people are still afraid to fly and they find Ireland expensive'. The largest group of students at Holywell are northern Italians, reports Leonard, but the school is now part of MEI-Relsa - which says Leonard, was 'a good marketing strategy for us' - through which they hope to expand their student nationalities.

A factor that has aided growth for Irish schools in general is improved flight connections. Direct flights were launched from Moscow to Dublin and Shannon, as well as flights to Ireland from Prague, Vienna, Geneva, Lisbon and Faro. Justin Quinn, Managing Director of the Centre of English Studies in Dublin, attributes their healthy 17 per cent growth in 2002 to lower flight costs. 'Get-

ting to Ireland has always been a problem and now with low-cost airlines and major carriers dropping their cost and restrictions it has become cheaper,' he says.

Gill Nother from MEI-Relsa says that the new European Union member countries are showing great interest in Ireland 'as a more affordable alternative to the UK'. However, how long Ireland can hold on to its significant price advantage remains to be seen as the euro strengthens against the pound sterling.

With a number of external factors exerting both positive and negative influences on the Irish market, it is difficult to see what the future holds. However, Quinn forecasts a rather bleak year for 2003. 'I think 2003 will be a bad year for Ireland,' he says. 'The war [in Iraq] has impacted on early winter bookings, the Sars virus has agents very nervous [and there is] the continuing economic slowdown in Europe.'

Visa issues

Ireland's visa issuance for some countries has been tightened up, creating problems for students wanting to study there. As Simon Gibson of the Irish College of English forecasts, 'The number of [study] visa students will drop due to stricter laws.'

Delays in visa issuance are common for Ireland, as the country only has visa offices in China and Russia, while all other visa applications must be made through Dublin in Ireland. 'Visa regulations and delays are an impediment to [market] growth,' confirms Ernie Crossen from the Dublin School of English.

According to Lisa Bartsch of the Slaney Language Centre in Wexford, they have had problems getting visas for Russian and Thai students in particular, while Eileen Leonard of Holywell Language Centre notes that the slow visa issuance rate has been hampering travel to Ireland from outside of the European Union in general.

Bartsch adds, 'It is annoying that it is almost impossible to follow up visa enquiries since it is impossible to contact the visa department by phone and emails are not being answered either.'

The restrictions on visas, particular for Chinese and Russian students, have had an effect on numbers going to Ireland from these countries. 'Performance of the Chinese market steadied off in 2002 as the visa processing system sought to ensure that student visas were issued only to those applicants genuinely interested in coming to Ireland for study purposes,' reports Gill Nother of MEI-Relsa. As a consequence, MEI-Relsa worked with the Irish Department of Justice to find ways to ease the visa problems faced by students in these countries. 'We are very pleased that substantial progress has been made. Work is starting to pay off, so China promises to become a healthy market in 2003,' says Nother.