



# academic gains

Demand for language courses that prepare students for academic studies in another country is growing. As a result, competition among providers is intensifying with more players developing interesting and relevant courses - good news for agents and students looking for high quality, targeted academic preparation programmes, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

With language learning for academic reasons being one of the main driving forces behind market growth, one of the red-hot products in the language travel market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is academic preparation (AP) - also known as foundation courses - particularly in English-speaking countries. More and more agents are recommending these programmes as they acknowledge their importance in equipping students with the skills to succeed at university, college or high school overseas.

Julia Lin at Hui Huang Overseas Educational Development agency in Taiwan reports that about 50 to 60 per cent of their clients take a language for academic preparation course, while Masakazu Sakata, Director of Network Communications in Japan, says that around 80 per cent of their clients want to take such a course. He says they recommend academic preparation courses, rather than pure exam preparation courses, as the students' 'purposes are to get into university or college' overseas, and the completion of such a course is seen as the most effective way of achieving this.

Although the traditional intensive general language course continues to dominate the language travel market, AP is a sector that is showing above-average growth for many providers. Clare McKinley, Senior Lecturer and Marketing Coordinator at ICELS, Oxford Brookes University in the UK, says that academic preparation is 'a, if

not *the*, major growth area' in the language travel market. Confirming this, Richard Gorst at St Clare's Oxford in the UK reports that in 2002/03, the number of students on their university foundation course doubled compared with the previous year. 'I think numbers increased because of improved promotion of the courses and the growing demand from China,' he says.

The nationality mix of students who tend to take AP programmes is closely linked to the main international students in the education system in the hosting country. Generally, Asian nationalities are most prevalent, especially Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean and Japanese students, while some schools also mention high numbers from Russia and Turkey as well as the Middle East and Latin America.

#### Course content variations

It is widely acknowledged by schools and agents that language skills alone are not enough to succeed at university or college in a different country. Although AP courses vary widely from one provider to another, they all aim to give students the knowledge they need for their continued education overseas.

'Our English for academic preparation (EAP) course, [called] Academia, is organised in three advanced levels, which students have to take in order to be considered fully prepared for academic life at any university programmes,' explains Alejandra Parra, Programme Director at the Language Institute at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) in the USA. The course includes academic reading and writing, advanced pronunciation training and a content-based, project oriented module. 'As students progress in these levels, they put their work together in the form of an academic portfolio. This constitutes their 'passport' into our university programmes,' says Parra.

At Shafston International College in Australia, Director Cameron Lloyd says, 'We include electives [in our EAP programme] and students can go to introductory lectures to get a feel for what a lecture at an Australian university is like.'

At Hastings College of Arts and Technology in the UK, students in China can actually begin their course at home, thanks to links between the college and Chinese universities. Students study for six months in China then transfer to the UK for a further six months.

Generally, EAP students need a relatively high level of English before starting a course. For example, Kaplan in the USA stipulates a Toefl paper score of 477 or computer score of 153, and St Clare's Oxford demands an IELTS score of between 5.5 and 6. '[We find that] 5.5 is not really sufficient for our academic subjects,' says Gorst. 'Anything below 5.5 is a waste of time because too much time is spent on language study and the students really struggle with their academic subjects.'

However, there are some EAP courses that also cater for students with lower language levels. At York University English Language Institute (YUELI) in Canada, there is a six-level academic pro

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gramme, which, at level one, is open to students with a basic level of English. Through the six levels, the course aims to 'develop university-level skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the critical thinking and study skills required for successful engagement with such degree programmes', says Jean Handscombe, YUELI Director. In addition to the 20 hours of classes, the programme includes a 'university life' component. This comprises specialist workshops covering a variety of topics to do with studying in North America, attendance at university lectures and involvement in the university's clubs, sports centre and events. Unusually, test preparation is not a part of the programme. 'We do not regard test preparation as being particularly helpful to long-term language development,' says Handscombe. 'But students can sign up for Toefl preparation or preparation for the York English Language Test as a separate course.'

In contrast, Kaplan's EAP course is highly concentrated on Toefl preparation. It has been redesigned to include more conversation and speaking in preparation for the new Toefl test in 2005. Despite the concentration on test preparation, it also includes textbook reading, vocabulary enhancement, time management and computer literacy. 'We recognise that students need to do well in the test but they also need to do well academically,' says Kaplan's José Flores.

### Hot competition

There are new AP courses continuously being developed. The Centre of English Studies (CES) in Ireland has recently launched a foundation programme to prepare students for certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate studies. 'Our [college] partners found that [many] students who complete a 24-week [general English] course do not have the aural and written competency [required],' explains Justin Quinn at the school. 'The programme will develop these skills.'

From this year, the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) in Canada has also started up an EAP course. Students take three credit courses at the university and two non-credit EAP courses that cover all the study skills required. From autumn 2003, UPEI will also offer an EAP course for students with slightly lower language levels.

Competition in the AP sector of the market is intensifying. Many governments such as those in Australia, New Zealand and the UK have pledged their support to build their education export markets, designing attractive branding for the industry and investing in overseas marketing. But it is not only the English-speaking markets that are angling for international students. Other countries such as Germany and France are increasingly realising the international potential of their education systems. France launched its EduFrance initiative to attract overseas students a few years ago, while Germany is running a 'Green Card' campaign for high flyers to study in Germany.

However, despite the desire to grow the international education markets in these latter countries, the AP sector remains rather underdeveloped. If there are any courses, they are usually solely to do with language exams for university entrance, as Barbara Spannhake at Akademie Klausenhof in Germany underlines. 'We offer preparatory training, [which is] our language course preparing students for the examination Test Daf, a German language exam for university entrance,' she says. However, the number of AP students in Germany is growing, according to Spannhake, so it may not be long before Germany finds itself having to develop the targeted academic preparation products found in English-speaking countries.

### More courses

In English-speaking countries, not only do providers face intense competition from other English-speaking countries, but also from other AP providers in their own countries, as Flores points out. 'What has happened in the industry over the last five years is that there has been a change in the focus of English language schools,' he comments. 'There used to be more diversity in programmes, but we have seen a shift towards more schools offering products to academically-bound students.'

In the UK, Gorst points out that more and more state universities and colleges are joining the fray. 'Competition from universities is a serious threat to the private sector,' he says. 'They offer very competitive fees. We simply cannot compete with [these] fees. Where we score is by providing small groups - four to six students - lots of attention and successful students then have the choice of a whole range of universities rather than being tied to one institution.'

AP courses are the first step towards university or college entrance in another country - and although most providers do not guarantee completion of the course will lead to a university place, it generally helps. 'If a student gets through the selection/interview process [with us] then he or she is likely to get a place at a reasonable university and survive the degree course,' claims Gorst. He continues, 'In my experience, many of the [guaranteed] places' out

## Challenges of overseas studies

It is not easy to study at university or college level in another language, as well as adapting to a different style of education and culture.

'The main problem area for students is academic writing,' asserts Alejandra Parra from the Language Institute at Nova Southeastern University in the USA. 'It is very difficult

for students to adapt to a new writing style which, at the same time, reflects a new way of thinking very different from their own.'

Catherine Gillan at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada highlights the different learning style in Canada that is alien to many students, particularly Asians. 'Asian students come from a traditional learning climate

where they are expected to memorise, but have not had much experience doing research, critical and creative thinking and writing. Our culture places much more emphasis on the latter skills and these are the elements that students have most trouble with.'

Jean Handscombe of York University English Language Institute in Canada warns

that all international students must be made aware that studying overseas is a challenge. 'Learning English to the level required to study in that language is not going to happen overnight, given the best school in the world [and] the best students,' she says. 'It takes hard work and a lot of application on both the student's and the instructor's part.'

José Flores of Kaplan in the USA mentions that students can be unrealistic of their language level and their ability to cope with their academic studies in a foreign country. 'To tackle this, we have designed an online assessment tool so [students] know how long they will have to study for [to reach an appropriate level],' he explains.

there lead to problems when students simply cannot cope with university studies once they have taken up their 'guaranteed' place.'

Students can sometimes obtain a provisional place at a university at the same time as they enrol on an EAP course. This is the case with UPEI's programme. '[Students] are encouraged to apply to the university at the same time as they apply to the EAP programme. They are given a conditional acceptance if they have the academic qualifications,' says Catherine Gillan, EAP Programme Coordinator.

There may be other advantages of taking an EAP course. Students who take the EAP course at the Language Institute at NSU in the USA do not need to take any other language tests. 'Upon completion of our academic track, our students are in a position to enter our university degree programmes without having to sit for international exams such as Toefl or Ielts,' says Parra.

### Hurdles to market growth

Like other sectors of the market, EAP demand is affected by factors such as global unrest, economic uncertainty and visa issuance. Parra says the stream of students to the USA has slowed mainly because of

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visa regulations. 'The students most affected, in our experience, have been Middle Easterners and South Americans,' she says.

Flores also mentions that the new student tracking system, Sevis, is currently going through some 'growing pains', which is exerting a negative influence on market growth. 'These kinds of policies cause a decline because it is not so simple to get a visa for the USA so people choose [other] destinations,' he explains. 'In some countries, students are expected to have a personal interview. In Brazil [for example], some students have to fly to where they have to have the interview, which might cost them US\$700 before they've even got their visa.'

## High school preparation

For students intending to continue their high school education overseas, there are language courses specifically to prepare them for this, particularly in the UK and Australia. Like

the university and college AP courses available, these generally provide students with language training as well as some lessons in the general subjects they will take at school and examples

of how students are expected to study.

Some private high schools have their own study centres that provide high school preparation for students going on to high school in

that country, but there are also language schools that offer these courses, and demand has been stable to good in many countries, according to school representatives.

Cameron Lloyd at Shafston International College in Australia, which offers a high school preparation programme, says, 'The market has been quite steady in the past few years.'

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Growth of the international market can also be affected by domestic demand for university places, as has been the case at YUELI in Canada, where, Handscombe reports, a 'short-term bulge' in domestic applications has meant a curtailment of the number of international students being accepted.

In Ireland, says Quinn, the opposite is true. 'A dropping birth rate [in Ireland] has now left an extremely well developed [tertiary education] industry facing a drop in applications over the next decade,' he observes.

Another factor that may affect demand for EAP is the development of private universities and offshore campuses in some

countries, particularly in Asia. However, Flores doubts this will have a long-term impact on the established markets. '[It] will effect some markets like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand with British, US and Australian campuses [setting up there],' he says. 'But in the long run, [English language speaking] countries will still be regarded as unique quality destinations. There may be a short-term shift but, in the long term, they will remain the major players and destinations.'

#### Agent input

As overseas studies are a considerable investment in both time and money for students, agents play an extremely important role in advising students about courses and education systems.

At Anglo-Continental in the UK, 60 per cent of its academic year students come via overseas agents. And the key to a successful agent relationship, according to Jackie Howchin at the school, is to keep agents fully informed. Similarly at the Language Institute at NSU, where around 50 per cent of students come through agents, emphasis is put upon a strong relationship with the agent, informing them about academic or programme changes. 'In a way, I see it as a cooperative effort, which in the end, benefits all of us,' says Parra. □

The Centre for English Studies (CES) in Ireland also offers a high school preparation programme. 'CES works with a private senior high school and [we] direct our students to this

school,' says Justin Quinn at CES. He says that there has been increasing demand for these courses from clients.

While high school preparation courses are generally more usual in

English-speaking countries, some German language schools are now starting to develop these products. From September 2004, DiD in Germany will be offering a high school preparation

course. 'We will offer a preparation course for young students, [aged] 14 to 16/17 [years old], to enter a private boarding school,' reports Madeleine Koetter, DiD Managing Director. At the

time of going to press, DiD was preparing the details of the course in collaboration with the German boarding school and was unable to give further details.