

US status quo

Enrolment levels at English language schools in the USA remain lower than pre-2001 but numbers are steady, and many schools are stepping up their relations with agents. AMY BAKER reports.

Working with agents

With the ESL market certainly being highly competitive in the USA, institutions are assessing their student recruitment channels and it seems that many are advocating further use of language travel agents and student recruiters.

Richard Porior at Saint Norbert College in De Pere, WI, is not alone when he says, "Well over half of our students come from agents – about 60 per cent – and I would say that this will increase in the future." He explains why. "[Agents] are more effective than any other means I have of recruiting students."

Not all institutions work with agents of course. A university-based institution that *Language Travel Magazine* spoke to indicated that it was not expected to operate as a profit-making stand-alone institution, and so using agents was not considered.

But those using agents see this method of student recruitment increasing, as competition intensifies. At Manhattan Language in New York, NY, Bonita Vander says that they work with many students directly, but they did approach agencies more often in the slower months of January and February. She adds that the number of their agency partners has also grown as there has been "an increase in the number of agents approaching me, who have clients who want to study here or who have found me on the web and want to work with me."

"I think things seem to be stabilising, but at a much lower overall level than before 9/11," says Kelly Franklin at the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP). "The most recent Institute of International Education (IIE) publication showed a drop of 50 per cent in the past three years for intensive English programmes, but I think the biggest drops were in 2002 and 2003."

Other representatives of the English language teaching industry in the USA back up Franklin's observations, suggesting little change so far in market performance in 2005, compared with 2004. "Our student numbers [this year] are about the same or slightly lower [than last year]," says Richard Porior, Director of ESL at Saint Norbert College in De Pere, WI, while both Bonita Vander of Manhattan Language in New York, NY and Rebecca Pond of New England School of English in Boston, MA, report that after a pretty slow start to 2005, business began to gain momentum in March and April to reach similar levels to the previous year. "[The market is] a little down this season from last year, but now things are picking up, and there is definitely not a spiral downwards [in terms of numbers]," relates Vander.

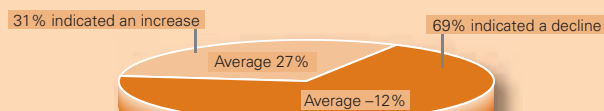
At Intercultural Communications College in Honolulu, HI, Joel Weaver is even optimistic about seeing a rise in numbers this year after a difficult 2004 when the school separated from its marketing company. "This [observation] is based on early interest as evidenced by inquiries and registrations to start later in the year," he reports.

The difficulty in gaining a study visa for English language study in the USA has been well documented and is cited by many as one reason for any decline or slowdown in business. Weaver points out that this perception is enough to turn students away – "the reality is that the doors are still open for bona fide students" – while Porior suggests a variety of reasons for the difficult business climate in his department: "higher costs and more difficulties in getting a visa, combined with the ease of studying in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and more opportunities to work there. And the price of the dollar, which makes things more expensive".

South American enrolments at US schools in particular have dropped, according to a number of industry sources, possibly due to a combination of economic and visa-related reasons. Vander in New York says that since September 11, 2001, their South American market has dried up. "Back in 2001, I think a lot of people told themselves that they weren't interested in coming to America," she says. "My experience now is that the highest rate of visa refusals



Enrolment declines at AAIEP members, late 2004*



* AAIEP estimates that the decline in enrolment is slowing. Source: Flash survey undertaken by AAIEP, Dec.

is in Brazil. In the Asian markets of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, most get visas – there are few exceptions." As a result, the traditional markets of Japan, Taiwan and Korea currently dominate enrolment lists. Christa Hansen, Director of the American English Institute at the University of Oregon in Eugene, OR, is just one of many schools that point to Asia as the most important student source region.

One more factor discouraging students from taking an ESL programme in the USA is the US\$100 Sevis fee, introduced in January last year to fund the tracking system. Porior states, "I think it's terrible to ask students to pay a US\$100 fee for Sevis when they are only coming for two or three weeks." But, even the reduction of this fee, suggested by two senators (see *Language Travel Magazine*, June 2005, page 6), would not, according to Porior, have a positive impact on enrolments straight away. "I could be wrong, but I don't think any change would have an immediate effect", he says. Hansen believes the fee "makes getting a visa more challenging" as it is one more thing to organise. "We give a first-term reduction for students to off-set the Sevis cost," she says.