

# UK looking ahead

Healthy growth and a widening pool of nationalities characterised the UK English language teaching market's performance in 2006, and sources believe this will continue. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

## New visa scheme awaited

A points-based visa system, similar to that in Australia, is to be introduced in the UK in the next few years. Currently the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) is responsible for maintaining a list of accredited schools or schools inspected by the department, and only those on the list can accept student visa holders.

Some industry sources believe the current DfES scheme has left the door open to disreputable schools, but Tony Millns at English UK argues that it is a first step towards regulation. "As such," he explains, "it doesn't represent a real check on quality, but has deterred bogus institutions."

Most schools, however, await with anticipation the new points-based visa scheme, believing that it will improve the situation for students who need visas to study in the UK. "We see many positives in the proposed legislation," states Tommi Muttonen at Twin Group. "The system should be more transparent as, in theory, students will be able to calculate their own points tally before applying for a student visa."

A new register for accredited providers will be introduced in late 2008 and Tier four of the points-based immigration scheme, which will be for students, is due to be launched in spring 2009. "This new scheme should mean that only properly accredited centres can enrol international students who require visas," states Millns.

Compared with previous years when BSE, foot-and-mouth disease, sars and terrorist attacks all put pressure on the language travel market in the UK, 2006 was a rather uneventful year – which was good news for English language schools.

According to the school's association, English UK, their members experienced a six per cent hike in student weeks in 2006. Tony Millns, Chief Executive of English UK, believes a number of factors have driven market growth. As well as globalisation, which is fuelling the need for English in the workplace, Millns says, "The general trend of growing affluence worldwide may also be behind the market's encouraging performance. As consumers have more money to spend, they may be 'trading up' to UK-based English language courses in preference to cheaper but poorer-value alternatives."

Reports from individual schools paint a glowing picture of 2006. Robert Charlton, Director of Leeds English Language School, says that 2006 was "an excellent year" for the school and "this is continuing into 2007", while Céline Cameron, Director of the Manchester Academy of English, reports that their sales "grew significantly" last year.

According to Cameron, their impressive 2006 performance is down to agents. "Direct sales haven't changed," she asserts. "The growth has come directly from new and existing agent partnerships. We believe in working with agents and, over the last two years, our strategy has been justified. Thanks to our agents, our figures are up by 26 per cent compared to this time last year."

Indeed, many schools in the UK have been focusing on their agent partnerships. Norman Renshaw of InTuition, which specialises in home tuition programmes, states, "We have put more effort into building our agency relationships and less on direct marketing for the last few years. We also focus on maintaining and supporting our existing agents as opposed to always looking to new pastures."

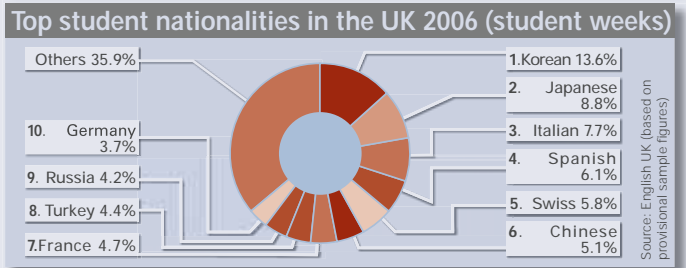
Another factor that has propelled growth is product development and expansion of provision. "We introduced a number of high quality residential centres, and our newly accredited year-round school in south London also performed particularly well," reports Tommi Muttonen, Group Marketing Manager at Twin. In addition, Twin has launched new programmes "based on a thorough knowledge of the markets". In September it is rolling out a business and hotel management diploma course, which Muttonen believes will attract new nationalities. "As a result [of the new diploma course we] will be promoting to some new markets for Twin – especially India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Nepal," he reports.

The Ardmore Group is also concentrating on new product development to expand business. "We are continually adding new summer course centres and new programmes and see this as important for both maintaining and increasing our client base," confirms David Walker, Ardmore's Chief Executive.

Attracting a wider range of nationalities is key to many schools' expansion plans. Millns reports "strong growth trends" from the



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Middle East and Eastern Europe, particularly Latvia and Romania. He elaborates, "Latvia and Romania both exhibited significant increases of over 100 per cent over 2005 in their total number of student weeks."

According to Millns, Latvia is experiencing an economic boom, expanding at one of the highest rates in the European Union (EU). "The subsequent increase in disposable income, coupled with the country's accession to the EU in 2004, has resulted in growing numbers of Latvians studying at UK language schools and universities," he says.

However, Ian Mucklejohn at Vacational Studies in Newbury says the expansion of the EU has had little effect on their student numbers. "[We have had] a few more [students] from Poland, but Hungary's foreign exchange rate and earnings are too poor to allow fee-paying clients to come."

Other factors, such as increased air routes in Europe are also having an effect on the market, according to Cameron. "The Scandinavian market is good for Manchester Academy because low-cost flight routes have enhanced easy access to northwest England. We have had strong bookings from Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and we have a Finnish group in the pipeline."

All in all, the outlook for 2007 is promising, although schools remain realistic about the "outside variables beyond our control", as Renshaw puts it. Nevertheless, he adds, "We are quietly confident that we will achieve substantial growth this year."

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