

UK on form

Rise in academic English

Demand for academic preparation or exam programmes is on the increase, according to language schools in the UK.

Natalie Dawe, Marketing Communications Manager at Bell International says that they have seen a significant rise in interest among students for language programmes that prepare students for further university study. "Our university foundation programme saw an increase of 400 per cent in enrolments in 2007, compared with 2006," she says. "With students wanting language training combined with subject tuition and academic skills to prepare them for postgraduate university life, we've introduced a Masters preparation programme," Dawe adds.

James Doherty, Managing Director of Celtic School in Cardiff says that they have also introduced more academic-focused programmes to meet demand. "We have developed our IELTS programme to include 'Bridge to IELTS'," he says. "First Certificate in English [courses] remain hugely popular with EU students while IELTS is most popular with students from the Middle East and Africa."

Meanwhile, an appetite for more serious study is even being noted in the younger age market. Susan Evans from the Kingswood Group says that they already offer language and academic programmes that are in line with the British curriculum at high school. She adds, "We are [also] able to offer agents something completely new and different, such as our Planet Ocean [course] which explores environmental protection and carbon footprints or Mission Critical, where students design and build their own computer games."

The UK's English language teaching industry is looking healthy despite some setbacks in particular student markets and increased business obligations imposed by the UK government. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

The UK's language teaching industry has been undergoing change with the introduction of compulsory accreditation on the horizon and new biometric data requirements for visa applicants ushered in this year. Yet schools report that bookings have never been better and demand for UK-based English language education remains high worldwide.

James Doherty from Celtic School in Cardiff says that they have experienced an overall growth of 30 per cent in student numbers over the past 12 months. "Developing relationships with new agents has paid dividends," he says, adding, "Obtaining British Council accreditation had an immediate affect [and] word-of-mouth remains by far the biggest generator of student enquiries and enrolments."

The recent government announcement that that all education providers enrolling student visa holders must be accredited by one of three approved accreditation providers by 2009 (see LTM, October 2007, page 6) has led to an increase in the number of schools seeking approval from Accreditation UK. Ella Tyler from Mountlands Language School in Exmouth says that the new requirement penalises "small schools that cannot afford to become British Council accredited" – although most of their students come from the EU and do not need a visa. She also points to healthy enrolments at the school. "We have seen an increase of about 10 per cent [compared with the previous year], which we put down to increased marketing, attending the Alphe workshop, advertising and direct mail campaigns," she says.

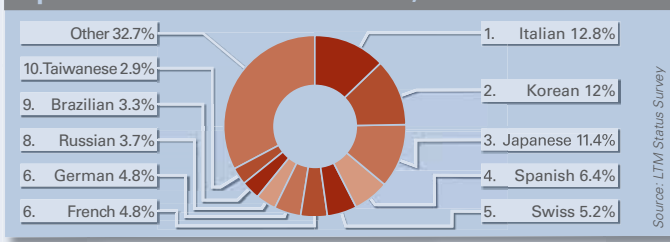
While student numbers remain strong across the board, schools report that the visa changes introduced last year have affected the nationality mix in their classrooms. Since February, students applying for visas to study in the UK have had to submit biometric data along with their application, which requires a personal visit to an embassy in their country (see LTM, May 2008, page 6). In countries where UK embassies are easily accessible, this has not proved to be too much of an issue, but some student markets, namely Russia, where students must travel to one of three cities, have been significantly affected. Susan Evans from The Kingswood Group says, "Like most language providers, one strong market for us that has declined is the Russian market, primarily due to the new visa regulations."

Natalie Dawe at Bell International says that the new biometric requirements are affecting students in a number of ways. "In Russia, where biometric testing is still relatively new, the process is complicated and has logistical and financial implications," she says, although she adds, "Russian students that choose the UK are deciding to stay longer." Dawe also points out that the new visa requirements have made the role of agents more important for students as



PHOTOGRAPH: BRITAINONVIEW

Top student nationalities in the UK, 2006



they have to counsel them on their visa applications. In some cases, the new requirements have had a positive impact on success rates, as Eve Risius-Andrews, also from Bell, explains. "In Korea, the biometric testing has led to an increased visa success rate according to agencies," she says, although she acknowledges that the new process is still deterring some students from applying to the UK.

Despite this, a continued rise in enrolments at UK schools has led to some developments among their business operations. Evans says that business growth has led to the group forming an international department that is focused on "growing Kingswood – our year-round programme – and Camp Beaumont – our summer camp business – while certain key members of staff are working solely on developing and enhancing the international programmes that we have on offer".

At Bell, Dawe says that they have recently grown their whole global operation, including the establishment of Bedgebury International School, which caters exclusively for the boarding school preparation market in the UK. Schools also point to an increase in demand for academic focused programmes for the higher education market and have been developing their products accordingly.●