

Middle East doubts

Despite tension in much of the Middle East since September 11 2001, most sources report that students are still travelling overseas for education, but choosing different destinations. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Before the cataclysmic events of September 11 2001, the Middle East travel and tourism market was already facing difficulties. According to the World Tourism Organisation, the general global economic slowdown and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had depressed travel throughout the Middle East during 2001. Although the language and education travel market was more resilient to these factors, the attacks on the World Trade Centre in the USA, war in Afghanistan, and the ensuing global tension and unrest led to a severe drop in student numbers in the last quarter of 2001. "From mid September until January, business was very slow, below what we would have expected," confirms Simon Gooch, Aspect ILA's Regional Manager for Eastern Europe, CIS and the Middle East.

Ibrahim Al-Najjar, at the British Council in Saudi Arabia, adds, "The number of students [we placed into institutions in the UK] might show a decrease in 2001 as an effect of September 11." However, according to Al-Najjar, some students transferred their scholarships from the USA to the UK last year, and he adds, "[In 2002], the UK could increase its share of the market because it is perceived to be safer than the US for Arab students."

The UK and the USA have been the traditional destinations for Middle Eastern students seeking language improvement and/or higher education opportunities, with the main student provider markets being Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). High-

lighting Saudi Arabia and Turkey as the main markets for Aspect ILA, Gooch says, "[They] are relatively mature, have established professional agents and are relatively 'visa-friendly'."

In the past, government funding for overseas studies has been one factor driving growth in education travel in the region, according to William Fish, a US-based consultant in international education. "Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kuwait and the UAE [used to offer] state sponsorship to 95 per cent of the students going to the USA," he says. "Prior to September 11, the number of state-sponsored students had been greatly reduced, primarily because of the economies in the home countries and the wider availability of higher education in those countries. [But] at the same time, the number of family-sponsored students from the Middle East has grown significantly."

The full effect on the market of the September 11 events and subsequent actions remains to be seen – many institutions in the mainstream education sector maintain that it will only become evident in enrolments in autumn 2002 – although anecdotal evidence suggests that North America is experiencing the largest drop in student numbers from the region. "Individual student numbers, as opposed to sponsored students, to the USA and Canada are down," reports Tim Kerr-Dineen, Regional Manager, Middle East, for Study Group. "Language, academic and vocational enrolments for the UK and Australia are up."

Some students are starting to look to new markets, such as New Zealand and Australia, in their quest to find alternative study destina-

tions to the USA. Although Australasia currently attracts only a very small number of Middle Eastern students, interest has been growing. Lester Taylor, Chief Executive of Education New Zealand, reports, "In the last quarter of 2001, there was a reported increase by institutions in enquiries from students from the Middle East." However, he adds, "It is too early to know if this increase in enquiries has resulted in an increase in enrolments."

Kerr-Dineen believes that, although Middle Eastern students may have changed destinations, they are still travelling overseas for educational purposes. "The rising numbers [of Middle Eastern students] for the UK and Australia have more than compensated for the decline in enrolments for the USA and Canada. Overall, Middle Eastern bookings [for Study Group] are considerably up," he says.

How long it will take for the USA to recover its popular standing remains to be seen. At present, says Fish, "Parents are concerned about the safety of their children in the US, especially with regard to incidents of violence against Middle Eastern students."

But Gooch is upbeat about the region's potential. "Bearing in mind that the bulk of the business from these countries is for the summer, there is time for bookings to return to normal levels by the end of 2002," he says. And he is optimistic about the long-term outlook. "The [Middle East] has the fastest growing population in the world. Approximately 50 per cent of the Saudi population, for example, is 15 or under, so the potential market for schools will grow considerably in the coming years."

Visa problems?

One of the repercussions of September 11 is the global concern over national security, causing a lengthening of the visa application process and, in some countries, an increase in visa denials. Notwithstanding, however, many sources maintain that the visa acceptance rate from Middle Eastern countries remains the same as it was prior to September 11.

"I have had no reports of delays in visa approval rates from the Middle East," asserts Lester Taylor of Education New Zealand, although he adds, "Our visa office in Pakistan had to take extra security measures at the beginning of the events in Afghanistan, which slowed visa processing [times]."

Many English-speaking destinations have stepped up their visa measures, which have resulted in a delay in visa issuance. "At best, it takes three weeks longer than before [to get a US visa], even for Saudis, Kuwaitis and Emiratis," reports Tim Kerr-Dineen of Study Group. "It may

also be slightly harder for some nationalities to get UK visas. [And] with the recent visa changes it is more difficult to assess the effect of September 11 on Australian visas."

Consultant William Fish in the USA argues that it has always been tough for Middle Eastern students to get a US visa. "There is a great misconception among some that it was easy for Middle Eastern students to get a student visa to the USA prior to September 11," he says. "For English language programmes, students from Jordan, Palestine, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen have almost always found it impossible to get a student visa. If the applicant did not have an acceptance for a degree programme, the visa was denied. That continues to be the case."

Simon Gooch of Aspect ILA adds, "My feeling is that the biggest hindrance to bookings has been the [potential student's] perception of embassies' attitudes to visa applications, rather than any real change in government policy."

