



The rise of Asia



The determined efforts of various Asian countries to position themselves as study destinations rivalling other English speaking countries for quality, programme diversity, language context and price has led to a new breed of competition in the East. AMY BAKER reports on the newest competition in the international education market.

Yes, more clients are going to study in Asia," testifies Don Kim, Director of Han Shin Consulting and Edu-Link in Korea, who says that "the most popular [destination] is the Philippines with English language programmes".

He is one of a number of agents, within Asia primarily, who acknowledge the rising appeal of the continent as a study destination for students, be that degree programmes (in the English language or other), high school education or English language programmes. Kim highlights Japan, China, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore as requested destinations among his clientele.

Education institutions in Asia have been jostling for a share of the international education market for some years now, and the inexorable rise of Asia as a genuine competitor to native English speaking countries has taken some educators by surprise: that the Philippines, for example, is competing with schools in the UK or USA for English language students was not expected or foreseen by all.

A pivotal reason for the march of Asia is the vision of certain countries' governments to realise their potential as an education destination, given their geographic proximity to a large target market and, in some cases, the prevalence of the English language as a lingua franca. Both Malaysia and Singapore have established national brands – Malaysia Education and Singapore Education – that promote education opportunities in the country. And the Philippines' Department of Tourism (DOT) dedicates a section of its website to promoting English language study.

English in the Philippines

Maria Rica Bueno, Chief Tourism Operations Officer and Head of Team Asia Pacific at the Tourism Planning and Promotions department in the Philippine DOT, relates that the key markets for them are Korea and latterly, Taiwan.

"As the main source of ESL students now in the Philippines are Koreans, the DOT participates twice a year at the Korean Student Fair in March and September," she tells *Language Travel Magazine*. "A roadshow to various universities and colleges in Korea together with ESL partners/institutions and agents in the market is also conducted." Fam trips to the Philippines for agents from Korea and Taiwan have been organised too. "In Taiwan, we have also started promoting ESL and we have tied up with a specialist agent in selling the package," says Bueno.

The appeal of the Philippines is, according to many agents, the relative low cost of English language study, and many students apparently choose to undertake a period of study here before going on to another country for a language course. The country has a good reputation among its Asian neighbours for English proficiency too. "Filipinos speak English from birth and the language acts as the

medium in which we are educated," pointed out First Secretary of the Philippine Embassy in Seoul, Sylvia Marasigan, in *The Seoul Times*. The DOT points out that English "is used as the business language as well as the medium of instruction in schools and universities" and estimates that around 93 per cent of Filipinos speak and understand English well.

In its 2007 annual report, the DOT cited English language learning, as well as "other forms of educational travel", as an important income stream, alongside medical tourism, golfing, diving and honeymoons, for example. The total number of English students in the capital region alone in 2005 was close to 7,000, and Bueno notes, "I believe the number of foreign students studying English will increasingly grow over the years; our office has been getting a lot of queries from Russia, the Middle East and Costa Rica, as well as within the region such as Vietnam, Thailand, China and Japan."

She also points out that higher education programmes in medicine, nursing and IT are already attracting international enrolments. Aside from English language learning, student visas issued for other forms of education in the academic year 2003/2004 numbered 2,161, of which 726 were awarded to Koreans and 378 to Americans.

Studying in Singapore

A major player in Asia for both English language learning and higher education is Singapore, which is proactively marketed and which has some good reasons to recommend it to students. Singapore Education – set up in 2003 – points out that as well as a bilingual policy in the education system (English with Malay/Mandarin/Tamil), it has three homegrown universities and 10 world-class education institutions: National University of Singapore was ranked 18th in *The Times* survey of the best 200 universities in the world in 2004. It also



underlines its multiculturalism, high quality of life and location offering easy accessibility for many (direct air links to over 145 cities).

John Gregory Conceicao, Director of Education Services for the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), the marketing and promotion arm of Singapore Education, points out that in 2007, Singapore hosted 86,000 international students from 120 countries. "We [aim] to have 150,000 full-fee paying international students here in Singapore by 2015," he says, as part of the Singapore – Global Schoolhouse initiative.

Overseas students hail mainly from other Asian countries and the primary attraction is degree courses. "In line with the needs of the new economy, educational disciplines such as biomedical sciences, tourism & hospitality, arts, design and new media are some of the fields of study that are in high demand," says Conceicao, "alongside the traditional favourites like business, finance and management courses, as well as English language programmes."



PHOTOGRAPH: STB

"The English language is used extensively in Malaysia – English is a compulsory subject at school, and maths and science subjects are taught in English"

Conceicao points to China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and India as most likely student provider countries. "We are now working to introduce greater diversity in the international student population, hence South Korea, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines have been added to the list of target markets in the past one to two years," he explains.

One successful English language school in the country is the British Council. Eleanor Oh, Director of Communications at the British Council in Singapore, explains that at any one time, there will be 7,000 students of English at the Council's teaching centres, with over 10,000 students taught each year. Singaporeans as well as foreigners enrol

with the British Council for English language training; Oh estimates a 60 per cent/40 per cent split and of the 40 per cent from overseas, "students come from mainly Asia, some are from Europe and South America". She points out that the valuable work being undertaken to promote Singapore as a "Global Schoolhouse" has helped boost enrolments, adding that the country's reputation for cleanliness and security is also attractive. "The growth of the middle class in China and southeast Asia has helped to fuel demand for our English courses," Oh elaborates. "Asians tend to invest in education as they believe it is the key to social mobility and economic success."

Proactive promotions

Initiatives in place to further ensure Singapore's success as an education hub include a quality mark for private schools and a centralised admissions process for international students applying to high school – this is due to be introduced for the 2009 intake. This will save students having to sit multiple admissions tests if they wish to apply for more than one school with the aim of maximising their chances of selection.

Speaking of the quality accreditation, Oh notes, "We were the first international private education provider in Singapore to receive the Singapore Quality Class for Private Education Organisations (SQC for PEOs), a quality assurance scheme launched by the government mainly for foreigners intending to study here."

A further innovation has been an agent training programme delivered by STB and the introduction of Singapore Education Awards to honour "Singapore Education Specialists". Conceicao reveals, "To date, over 200 student agents across 11 markets have been trained and certified under this scheme." At the 2008 Singapore Education Awards, companies from China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand and India received such an award.

Conceicao details yet more brand building activities. "We opened a Singapore Education Services Centre to provide authoritative and reliable information on studying and living in Singapore," he says. Offering monthly orientation talks and tours to help students settle in, the drop-in centre can be visited by both prospective and enrolled students. Education talks for those wanting to find out more about education in Singapore are conducted every month.

Malaysia's major growth

Another ambitious education destination is Singapore's neighbour, Malaysia, which markets its educational opportunities under the Malaysia Education brand or via StudyMalaysia.com. Statistics from the Immigration Department show that 65,000 foreign students enrolled in international schools and private or public institutions of higher education in 2007, up from 48,000 in 2006. Mohamed Nasser Mohamed Noor, Marketing and International Education Division Director at the Higher Education Ministry, attributes the 30 per cent increase to the country's new identity abroad – Malaysia Education. Malaysia has as a goal a target of 100,000 foreign students by 2010.

Indonesian and Chinese students are reported to be the most numerous in the foreign student population, followed by those from the Middle East and Africa. Malaysia is a popular higher education destination, with private universities, branch campuses of foreign universities and private colleges that conduct foreign university degree programmes all offering degree programmes, as well as public universities offering MBA or PhD programmes to foreigners.

But Malaysia is in fact promoting itself for education across the board, from primary to tertiary level and English language training. The StudyMalaysia.com website notes, "Malaysians have been influenced, especially during the British colonisation period, to use English in their daily transactions. The English language

is used extensively in Malaysia, in commercial or social settings, formal or informal situations – in business transactions, Internet communication, advertisements and the entertainment industry.” English is a compulsory subject at school and maths and science subjects are taught in English. At tertiary level, the same rule applies, while all private higher educational institutions use the English language as the medium of instruction. A range of colleges offering preparatory or stand-alone English language training is listed on the StudyMalaysia.com site.

Malaysia’s Department for Private Education (DPE) has as a goal “to make Malaysia a centre of educational excellence that offers quality education at primary to post-secondary levels”. It has a marketing strategy that includes attending overseas education fairs and plans to “promote aggressively the Malaysian pre-tertiary education overseas in countries like Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, China, Vietnam, Oman, UAE and some countries in Africa”.

Vocational training, such as accountancy, is also popular here. At Center for Logistics Leadership in Business (CLLB) in Selangor, Meera Bai Ruben testifies that foreign enrolments are rising. She points to Africa and Thailand sending most students. “Logistics is a growing industry in Malaysia and many full-time students are keen to gain more knowledge in the theory sector,” she explains.

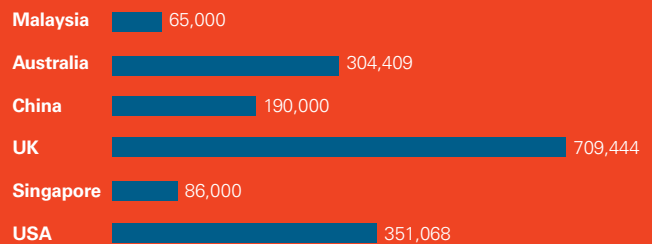
Selling points

As well as a multicultural environment, modern infrastructure and the prevalence of the English language as modus operandi in business and education, Malaysia and Singapore also have other selling points. Since 1995, Malaysia has offered all full-time tertiary students the right to work part-time for up to 20 hours a week during holidays. >>>



PHOTOGRAPH: STB

Estimated total overseas student enrolment in various countries by numbers, 2007



Sources:
 Malaysia – The Star ref. Immigration Department
 USA – Open Doors, NAIS, Language Travel Magazine
 Singapore – Singapore Education
 Australia – Australian Education International
 China – China Daily ref. Ministry of Education
 UK – HESA, Language Travel Magazine, ISC
 NB: Data relates to commencements not total enrolments

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Destination China

China is big news both as a student provider country and an education destination. As well as supplying many higher education destinations around the world with a steady stream of students, China is aiming to position itself as a leading educator. Although some degree programmes are available in English (a list is available on the Ministry of Education's website), many are in Mandarin, and the Mandarin teaching market is on the rise too.

In 2007, over 190,000 foreign students went to study in China, according to the Ministry of Education's latest statistics. Korea was the largest provider of students into China, followed by Japan, the USA, Vietnam and Thailand.

The proportion of Mandarin language learners among this number is not known, but in a separate estimate in the *International Herald Tribune*, 100,000 foreigners were said to have gone to China in 2006 to study Mandarin, more than five times the number in 2001.

In December, a language assessment framework was introduced for speakers of other languages so they can match their Mandarin fluency to standard levels. The Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages were designed with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language and Canadian language benchmarks.

The number of Confucius Institutes, set up with the backing of the Office of Chinese Language Council International to promote Chinese language learning and culture around the world, has multiplied rapidly in recent years. Since March alone, new institutes in Ankara in Turkey, Cairo and Ismailia in Egypt and Lisbon in Portugal have opened and the current total is 238 centres in 69 countries.

It also claims to have a fairly expedient immigration process (with long-term residence rights for family members of students too), a stringent quality assurance mechanism and vaunts itself as a pioneer of transnational education. Students can opt to enrol on a degree programme that gives them one year overseas at a partner university in Australia or the UK, for example, or they can enrol for a degree offered by a foreign university but delivered entirely in Malaysia.

In Singapore, part-time work rights are available for a restricted number of students – those studying at one of 20 education institutions comprising mainly universities or polytechnics. Work rights in vacation periods for over-14 year olds are more widely available for students at 39 institutions, including some high schools. Another interesting incentive that Singapore has put in place is a tuition grant subsidy that students at 11 universities are eligible for. In return for staying on and working in Singapore for three years, a 50 per cent subsidy can be applied for from the government.

Certainly, there is much to attract students in Asia, and among other destinations such as Thailand and Japan, which have institutions active in international recruitment, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines are all benefiting from macro-policies put in place by government to attract foreign students. Alvin Teo at Kaplan in Singapore, which offers English language training, higher education programmes (diplomas, bachelor, Masters and postgraduate) and professional programmes (CAT and Acca), says international enrolments are growing. He sums up, "This is likely due to the general appreciation across the world of the importance of education, but more importantly, the attraction of Singapore as a preferred education destination – and this is largely thanks to the efforts from the Singapore Education division of the Singapore Tourism Board." ●

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