

Germany's focus

Language schools in Germany report good growth for 2003, largely because of interest in higher education opportunities. But there were also visa issues to contend with, as BETHAN NORRIS reports.

Despite difficult market conditions, the German language teaching industry had a good year in 2003, with many schools reporting strong growth across the board. "Referring to student numbers we had a very good increase of 14 per cent in German courses in general," says Uwe Stränger from Prolog in Berlin, who adds that students also "stayed for longer or booked more intensive courses".

Erich Thaler also reports healthy increases in student numbers at his school BSI Private Sprachschule in Berlin. "[Student numbers showed a] very good performance [in 2003] – up 20 per cent compared to 2002," he says.

Germany's resilience in the face of challenges such as the war in Iraq, visa problems and the Sars outbreak was noted in our Market Report on Germany last year (see *Language Travel Magazine*, April 2003, page 21). The continued increase in international student enrolments is largely attributed to a continued rise in student interest in Germany's higher education opportunities.

Thaler claims that the "opening up of the German university market" has had a big impact on enrolments, while Tiziana Abegg from F+U International Academy in Heidelberg adds, "We have recently seen an increase in enrolments from Asian students wishing to learn/improve their German so that they may go on to study at German universities."

The importance of the higher education sector in the German language teaching market has a strong influence on nationality breakdown in German language schools. Thaler reports that Asian student markets performed better than European ones in 2003. "European students do play a role during vacation time, but not during the year," he says.



Hans-Georg Albers from school chain, Carl Duisberg Centren, notes that previously "strong markets such as Spain and Switzerland" did not perform so well in 2003, while enrolments from Japan and Korea grew by five and 10 per cent respectively.

However, interest in Germany's academic courses is not solely confined to Asian students, as the performance of one particular European market last year indicates. The number of Turkish students rose at many schools last year and Albers attributes this directly to the attraction of university study.

"Studying at a German university is getting more and more interesting for Turkish students," he says. "Many Turkish people have friends and family living in Germany, [so] they send their children to learn German and hope they find a good job there."

Meanwhile, at Inlingua Munich, Italian students remain the largest nationality and Isabel Heckelmann at the school explains why. "Tourism in the northern parts of Italy is very common and people are expected to speak German," she says.

Sabine Steinacher from Augsburgers Deutschkurse in Augsburg says that their school only has marketing plans for Europe, underlining that the traditional European student mar-

kets remain important for some. "The only thing we are planning is to target Italian schools for tourism as in North Italy, German becomes more and more important," she reveals.

Thaler also predicts that French student numbers will start to increase this year. "The Goethe Institute in Paris has started a big advertisement campaign all over the country for learning German," he relates.

European markets do provide a good student base at many German language schools and have the added advantage of being free from visa difficulties, which appear to have caused problems over the past year. "Getting a visa for Germany is getting more and more difficult in various countries," says Albers. "For example, India, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, Cameroon, Nigeria and sometimes even Turkey."

For the Chinese market in particular, visa difficulties have proved to be a challenge. "Our percentage of Chinese has gone down [in 2003] as visa regulations became very hard," says Florian Meierhofer at BWS Germalingua in Munich. "It is almost impossible now to enter without having already an intermediate level of German." Stränger agrees, "[We had] important losses in China that were definitely due to the restrictive German visa policy."

Targeting students

While a number of new student markets have become more important for German language schools over the last few years, schools are still keen to seek out new opportunities. The recent enthusiasm for academic study in Germany has introduced a whole new sector of students to language schools in the country and many language providers are keen to make the most of any potential business avenues.

"A big challenge is to be in the right market at the right time," says Florian Meierhofer from BWS Germalingua in Munich. "Therefore you have to find answers to questions before someone else answers them, such as will the new European Union (EU) countries bring more business to German language schools?"

So far, German schools have reacted cautiously to the accession of 10 new countries to the EU last month with few direct marketing strategies planned. The potential for these new markets has yet to be fully gauged.

"Hopefully [enrolments in 2004 will] increase after the official entrance of East European countries to the European market," says Uwe Stränger from Prolog in Berlin.

However, the prospect of breaking into some other student markets is eliciting a more proactive response from schools, as the benefits of having a more diverse student body and reducing seasonality are realised. "We are trying to expand in the American market since until now we had big expansion in the Asian and European markets," says Tiziana Abegg from F+U International Academy in Heidelberg.

Meierhofer adds, "We are watching out for more long-term students in order to fill up our weak periods. We [are targeting] students from Sweden, but also students in more distant parts of the world, for example Japan and South America."