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USA back on track

The perennial problem of obtaining a visa for study in the USA seems to be improving and as a result of this, and a Saudi scholarship scheme, many institutions are posting increases in enrolments. AMY BAKER reports.

Saudi student scholarships

A meeting between the USA's President George W Bush and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah in Texas in April 2005 has paved the way for an influx of Saudi students into the USA – via scholarships offered by the Saudi government – which many institutions are reporting to be benefiting from.

Deborah Healey, Director of the English Language Institute at the University of Oregon in Corvallis, OR, says, "So far this year, we are doing very well thanks to the Saudi government's scholarship programme. It has helped us a great deal." Amy Osorio at Wesli in Madison, WI, adds, "We have benefited greatly from the Saudi scholarship programme!"

Bush and Abdullah issued a joint statement of broad cooperation following their meeting, which was convened to cement the US-Saudi relationship. First in their list of aims to achieve this was "to increase the number of young Saudi students [applying] to travel and study in the United States."

So far, up to 5,000 scholarships, covering tuition and accommodation, are reported to have been awarded to students, and the Saudi government has pledged to award 20,000 scholarships for study in the US over four years.

Visa delays are still being reported by some Saudi students (see *Education Travel Magazine*, May 2006, page 48) but nevertheless, it seems that many institutions around the country are welcoming the efforts of the two governments to improve intercultural understanding through study abroad.

It seems that the US English language teaching (ELT) market has turned a corner, and many institutions are reporting that a rise in enrolments in 2005 has been followed by an even more positive performance so far this year.

Lynne Richmond, Director of the American Language Program based at California State University Fullerton in Fullerton, CA, says, "Business last year and even more so this year is good. Last spring our intensive English programme was up by 15 per cent [compared with] spring 2004 and this spring 2006, we're up 20 per cent from spring 2005."

Joy Allameh, Director of the EELI at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, KY, adds, "Business was much improved at the EELI in 2005 over 2004, and certainly 2006 is looking even better." Helen Davaran at LSI in Berkeley, CA, agrees, noting a significant 20 per cent growth in business in 2005.

However, it is not all good news in the USA, and Davaran explains some of the inconsistencies noted at her school, despite the overall good performance last year. "We were up because we had a lot of new bookings from Korea and Taiwan and some groups," she says. "We were down for Europe and Japan definitely because of visa issues; short-term English language students refuse to go through the expense and hassle to get a student visa when they think they should be able to come on a [visa] waiver."

Elsewhere, school representatives also note that last year was not a good year for Japan in terms of enrolments, although this market is one of the most important for the ELT sector in the USA. Arlene Spencer, Director of International Student and ESL Programs at Fulton-Montgomery Community College in Johnstown, NY, explains, "Japan is still a good market but the economy there has had a big impact on numbers."

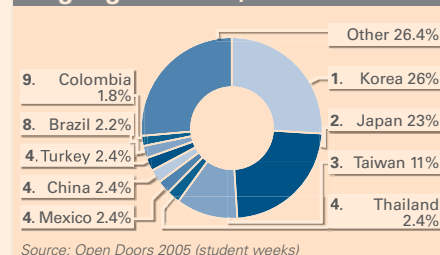
The student market that is most obviously performing well is Saudi Arabia, buoyed by a wave of new scholarships for study in the USA made available by the government of Saudi Arabia (see left). In addition, schools point mainly to Taiwan and Korea – other important markets – as performing well. Amy Osorio at Wisconsin English as a Second Language Institute (Wesli) in Madison, WI, relates, "Korea is still strong and we had more interest from Brazil and Turkey [both in the top 10 providers] than in the past few years."

Brazil and Colombia both appear in the top 10 student nationalities in the Open Doors report of trends across 194 IEPs in the USA, but in fact a number of spokespeople, such as Steve Horowitz of the UESL Program at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, WA, label Latin America as an underperforming region last year. Other problems were noted with applications from China and Eastern Europe in general. Horowitz notes, "We had many Ukrainian applications but no visas are issued for short-term study."

Where enrolments are slow, it is generally thought that visa issues may still be to blame, although Joel Weaver at Intercultural Communications College in Honolulu, HI, notes that it is also the perception of visa issuance problems that continues to exert a negative influence on the market. In his case, "visa denials from mainland China continue to be an issue", he says.



Top student markets for US language schools, 2004



The Department of State has been involved in improving the visa process recently and stresses that students who are awarded a study visa now receive it promptly (see *Language Travel Magazine*, April 2006, page 6). In the main, there is optimism that the efforts being made by the US government will improve business. "The increasing quickness of I-20 issuance, the US dollar exchange rate and the increasing interest of US universities in international education are helping the situation and improving our business performance here," says Richmond.

Norma King at the English Language Center at the University of Denver, CO, who notes a lengthy visa process for Libyan students, says, "Government attention to the issue of student visa issuance is essential and if really there, this will help." However, Dulene Cipriano at the Language Company – South Bend English Institute in South Bend, IN, sounds a note of caution. "Consular officials making partial and unfounded requirements and judgements continue to be a problem," she says.