

Australia's lustre

Elicos schools in Australia feared the worst when new visa regulations were introduced last year, but most have been pleasantly surprised by the market's strong performance. GILLIAN POOLE reports.

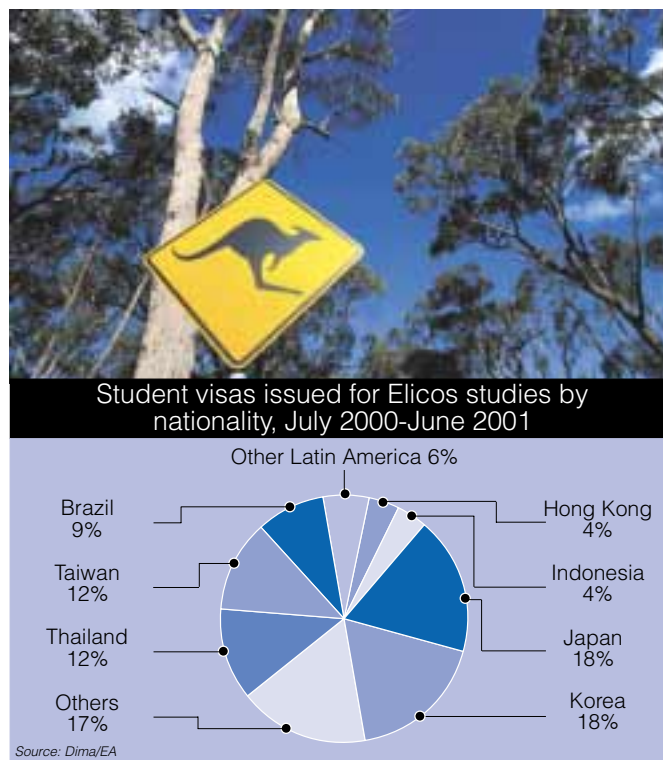
There are certain factors that continue to make Australia a favourite language learning destination. "As always, [the] great weather and low prices encourage students from all parts of the world," asserts Gary Smith of PGIC Brisbane.

Statistics from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (Dima) reveal that the number of student visas issued for Elicos studies between July 2000 and June 2001 increased by 17.6 per cent to 18,709, and many individual schools reported 2001 year-end growth of up to 50 per cent.

Many sources had feared that the pace of growth would slow, if not halt, in the latter half of last year because of the new visa regulations introduced in July 2001. All countries have been allocated an assessment level (AL), ranging from one to five, with five being the most stringent. One of the most contentious new criteria is that students from countries graded AL4 – which includes Vietnam and China – must have a high IELTS score of at least 5.0 to go on an English course in Australia.

In order to assess the impact of the new visa regulations on a selection of countries, English Australia (EA) conducted a survey of forward bookings taken between July and September 2001 by its members. The results revealed that, compared with the corresponding period in 2000, bookings from Jordan, Colombia and Indonesia were down, while those from China were up by around 50 per cent and from the Czech Republic by over 100 per cent. Across the nine countries surveyed, total enquiries were up on the previous year.

Confirming the EA findings, Warren Milner, of Milner International College of English in Perth, says, "I expected a downturn [in



student numbers]. The opposite is true. Agents have taken [the visa changes] in their stride." However, he adds, "Despite [this], visa regulations are a major deterrent in some countries."

Jane Mourão, Marketing Manager at Sydney English Language Centre, believes that for countries with lengthy visa processes – like China – it may take a while before schools can assess the impact. But she adds, "Korea, which was expected to suffer greatly, has instead continued to thrive as a viable market."

However, the Intensive English Language Institute at Flinders University in Adelaide has had a different experience. Its Director, Bonnie Cothren, says the new visa regulations have been "a disaster" in Korea. "Students don't want to bother with the long waits and cumbersome requirements and so come to Australia on visitor or working holiday visas," she

explains. "The motivated, academic students who normally came for a full academic year are staying away, and the holiday students have increased. This hasn't adversely affected our numbers, but it has affected the quality of the students Australia attracts."

Latin America remains a concern for all, as most countries there have been graded AL3. "The rating for most South American countries, except Brazil, is a disappointment and makes Australia less competitive than it was before," claims Mourão. Cothren agrees. "Several years of marketing efforts in South America have been completely wasted."

On the upside, Australia is benefiting from the global concern about terrorism and the country's international reputation as a safe destination. EA stated in its December 2001 newsletter that members were reporting "record enrolments" because of this.

Market trends

Gary Smith, of PGIC Brisbane, says, "The market we attract is typically the student who has some business experience and wants to develop his or her English ability to increase job opportunities or to support a complete change in area of employment." This means that the vast majority of students – 60 per cent according to our Status survey of Australia (see *Language Travel Magazine*, October 2001, page 52) – are in the 19-to-24 year old age bracket.

Nevertheless, demand for junior courses is growing. "The past two years have been very busy for study tours with juniors," reports Bonnie Cothren at Flinders University. "We have turned some requests down because of the high demand." According to the Status survey, under-18 year olds accounted for just over 12 per cent of student weeks in 2000.

In terms of student recruitment, the Internet has been producing a growing flow of enrolments. "The Internet is helpful in countries such as Japan, Germany and Italy [because of] the computer literate populations and easy visa process. We are seeing more Internet enrolments and expect this trend to continue," says Jane Mourão of Sydney English Language Centre.

However, overseas agents remain fundamentally important in most schools' marketing mix. "We count on our agents to provide a comprehensive explanation of our programmes and policies to students," sums up Smith.

Cothren warns that, in view of the new visa regulations, it is imperative that agents have a thorough knowledge of the details. "There are problems with [some] agents, especially with the new emphasis on visitors visas," she says. "Students are coming to Australia without knowledge of the restrictions placed upon changing visas [or] extending visas [once in the country]."