

Australia flourishes

Despite the introduction in 2001 of more stringent visa regulations for some countries, the English language teaching market in Australia continues to thrive, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

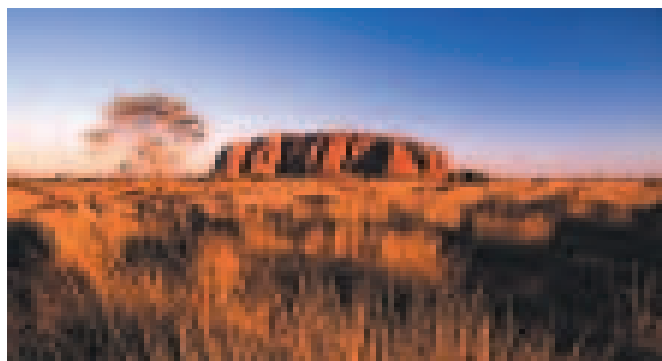
Students studying at English language schools in Australia spent AUS\$710 million (US\$414 million) in 2001, according to a study commissioned by English Australia (EA) and published last year. The study also revealed that student numbers increased by 22 per cent in 2001 to 81,053, despite difficult market conditions worldwide and tighter visa issuance regulations in Australia (see right).

Many individual language schools confirm this experience and report another favourable performance in 2002. Leanne Everett of Language Links in Perth says their enrolments were up by 50 per cent in 2001 as they moved to larger premises and widened their network of overseas agents, while in 2002 the school recorded further growth of around 15 per cent. Anna Donaghy of NCELTR – English Language Services at Macquarie University reports a 60 per cent hike in student numbers in 2002, and adds, “We have had exponential growth over the last five years.”

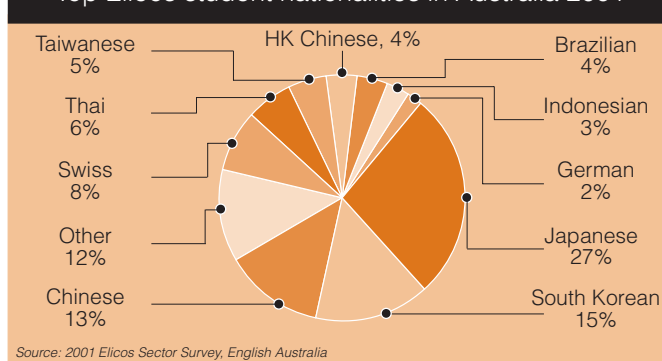
According to Helen Cox, Director of the South Australian College of English, which experienced “a very busy year” at both its Adelaide and Hobart schools, increases in enrolments may be attributable to students’ perceptions of Australia as a safe country and the low Australian dollar.

As in most other English-language teaching markets, the growth of Australia’s industry is being driven by demand from international students for a tertiary education overseas. As John Paxton of Perth International College of English puts it, there has been an “increased focus on using [English] as a step up into the next education product, for example, business college or university”.

In line with the demand for more serious language learning



Top Elicos student nationalities in Australia 2001



Source: 2001 Elicos Sector Survey, English Australia

goals, many schools are developing new targeted language programmes. “We are looking at the trend towards business English for higher level students, and promoting courses such as the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry [exams] and [University of Cambridge’s] BEC as dedicated courses,” says Paxton.

Donaghy mentions the launch of new courses for university students, “including disciplinary specific direct-entry programmes because of the increase in students wishing to study at university”.

The desire to study in Australia is particularly strong in China, with Chinese student numbers at Australian universities increasing by 44 per cent in the 12 months to the second semester in 2002, according to an IDP Education Australia survey. This has also resulted in more Chinese students at English language schools in the country.

Asia as a whole contributed a hefty 76 per cent of students to Australia’s English language industry in 2001, according to EA’s survey, with Europe making up 17 per cent of students and a further six per cent from South America.

Whether Australia will sustain its rapid growth rate in 2003 is a much-discussed point in the face of international unrest. Many sources, such as Paxton, remain upbeat. “I can’t see growth slowing, all things being equal with global factors, [for example] war in the Middle East. We are continuing to be seen as a safe and value-for-money destination with an excellent standard in all education services and products.”

The long-term outlook is also good for Australia. According to IDP, international education – currently the third-largest export service industry – could rival tourism as Australia’s biggest export earner in the next decade.

Visa sticking point

When Australia introduced new visa regulations in July 2001 there was much concern from the English language teaching industry (see *Language Travel Magazine*, September 2001, pages 6-7). This led to a review of the legislation and some amendments that came into force in November 2002. However, many industry sources report that the damage to the market had already been done.

“Changes to visa regulations have translated in reducing student numbers from many countries such as Vietnam and Russia,” reports Helen Cox of the South Australian College of English. “[They] have discouraged students, and discouraged agents from some countries promoting Australia as a study destination.”

David Hurford of Regent Australia English Language Centre says that the visa changes are “understandable but definitely negative”, and he believes Australia is losing out to other countries. “For certain [student provider] countries, there are alternatives available with much easier entry requirements, for example, New Zealand or Ireland. We are losing potential students and developing a reputation of ‘a tough country to gain entry to’ according to agents,” he says.

The amended visa regulations that were announced in November have helped Australia win back some students. Leanne Everett from Language Links says, “The lowering of [the assessment level] band for... Korea has [led to] an increase in student numbers.” However, she adds, “Difficulties in obtaining visas for countries such as Indonesia and South America have limited our student numbers from these areas.”

Kate Kannegiesser of RMIT English Worldwide adds that although the new regulations have brought greater transparency, “some [visa issuing] posts still act subjectively, for example for Argentina and Brazil”.