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Australia flourishing

Australian language schools report positive results for 2006, with many institutions diversifying their course offerings in order to ensure good growth in the future. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

Visa changes

The Australian government performed a radical overhaul of its student visa system in 2001 in a bid to make visa requirements for individual nationalities more transparent (see *Language Travel Magazine*, September, 2001). The system has worked well on the whole and been improved since its inception, but one subsequent tweaking of the requirements has caused a problem for some.

"Raising the IELTS level of senior secondary students from 5.0 to 5.5 has had a big impact on our college," says Heather Ulanas from Sydney West International College at the University of Sydney in Sydney, NSW. "Luckily our numbers have improved in other countries so we didn't feel the impact too greatly but it would have been much better for us if the level had not risen."

Other recent visa changes in Australia, however, have had a beneficial effect on enrolments. A recent change to working holiday visa regulations, allowing visa holders to study on language courses for four months instead of the previous maximum of three, is likely to boost enrolment figures (see *Language Travel Magazine*, July 2006, page 7). Margaret Dyer from SA Adelaide Language Centre in Adelaide, SA, highlights this factor as being important for influencing future enrolment trends, along with "changes to country classifications for student visas and an increase in business migrants from China".

The Australian English language teaching market has been experiencing something of a boom in recent years, with the latest English Australia figures for 2005 recording a growth rate of 11 per cent on the previous year to 101,087 students nationwide. Coupled with enrolment increases of 16 per cent the previous year, this spells good news for many language schools around the country, many of which report that growth has continued throughout 2006.

Seamus Fagan, Director of English Language and Foundation Studies at the University of Newcastle in Newcastle, NSW says that 2006 was a better year for them than 2005. "Reasons for the change [include] continued growth out of China, Japan and the Middle East," he explains. Asian student markets have always been important for Australian language schools and this trend has continued in the last few years – students from this world region accounted for 80 per cent of enrolments in 2005, according to EA statistics. However, some schools attribute their increased presence in new student markets as a reason for increased numbers last year.

"Our student numbers are much higher this year, due mainly to more diversity in our nationality mixture but at the same time, re-enforcing relationships with our best performing agents," says Wayne Parry from Access Language Centre in Sydney, NSW. "We continue to do well in markets such as Korea, Germany and Japan but we are seeing a healthy increase of students from Brazil, Spain and Russia." At Sydney West International College at the University of Sydney too, the student body is becoming increasingly diverse, according to Heather Ulanas at the school, although she points out that Chinese students make up the majority of students. "In saying that," she adds, "we have a multicultural mix that is the result of marketing in 30-plus countries worldwide."

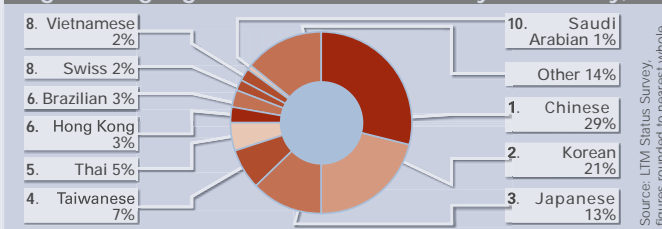
Chinese students are also important for SA Adelaide Language Centre in Adelaide, SA, according to Margaret Dyer. "Taiwan is currently best for adults and China is still best for secondary school students," she says. Dyer concludes that enrolments increased at the school in 2006 due to increased provision of adult language programmes including "more IELTS and EAP [English for academic purposes] courses". The school has also developed partnerships with local tertiary institutions over the past year which has had a positive impact on enrolments, and this highlights a trend among language students in Australia wanting programmes that provide a pathway into higher education.

"The introduction of university foundation studies in nursing [has resulted in a] good increase in student numbers," notes Ulanas, who adds that the school has plans to develop links with higher education programmes in the future. "The development of more diploma programmes leading students into second year at the University of



PHOTOGRAPH: SOUTH AUSTRALIA MEDIA GALLERY

English language students in Australia by nationality, 05



Western Sydney is being ratified at present," she adds.

As well as responding to the demand for more academic-oriented language programmes, some schools have also been widening their product base in other directions. Increased demand by students for programmes that combine language learning with a work experience placement has been highlighted by language schools around the world, and Australia is no exception. "The biggest impact [on our student enrolments last year] has been an increased interest in combining courses with our internship programmes from students who were traditionally not our biggest markets for work experience," says Parry.

When it comes to predicting trends for 2007, most schools are upbeat about the future. Fagan says that a growth in enrolments will be sustained during the year although he does predict that there might be "a slowdown in numbers from China". He elaborates that this may be due to an ease of student visa restrictions in the USA and "the UK proving popular" with students. However, overall, he summarises, "Growth will be sustained because of [our] transparent visa policy, good work done through the EA agents' workshop and a continued strong perception that Australia offers quality English language programmes."