

# Italian standstill

The Italian language teaching market remained blighted by the strength of the euro in 2004, although early reports for 2005 paint a brighter picture of business performance. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

## Diversifying

Italy is hampered by visa barriers because, as Marco Pravi at Centro Culturale Conero, puts it, "The Italian authorities think that we are used for illegal immigration."

Those nationalities that are widely affected include Chinese, Nigerian, South American and some Eastern Europeans.

But despite problems, schools are hopeful that the expansion of the European Union will lead to more Italian language learners from Eastern Europe. However, it could take some time, as many sources believe there will be a trickle-down effect once English language learning has become established there.

A handful of schools have already noticed some increase in demand. "In 2004 we had more students from Poland and also an increase of Serbian students from Croatia," says Andreas Gründer at Italiamo in Livorno.

But Cesare Portolani at Scuola Palazzo Malvisi observes, "Our school is located in a not well known place – Bagno di Romagna – so, first of all, it is difficult to recruit students from Japan, USA and North Europe because first choice is always Florence, Rome and Siena."

However, a dispersion of Italy's main student nationalities is occurring, according to Cristiana Panicco at Sorrento Lingue. "Americans who have for so long been attracted to the more well known cities are looking for alternatives," she says, noting that US students are now her top nationality.

Initial reports from Italian language schools in Italy for the first quarter of 2005

suggest that this year could buck the trend of the past two years. In February, for example, Scuola Palazzo Malvisi in Bagno di Romagna was, according to Cesare Portolani at the school, already experiencing "bella domanda" for its 2005 programmes.

It is with considerable relief that language schools look forward to this year, having laboured under the negative effects of the strong euro and the relative weakness of the US dollar for the past two years. These factors certainly dampened growth in 2004. "We had a [reduction] in students compared with 2003 due mainly to the weakness of the US dollar," confirms Angelo Perugini at Istituto Galileo Galilei in Florence.

Keryn Ursi at Centro Studi Italiani in Urbania agrees, "The euro affected the market negatively for us in 2004, as our main [intake] of students comes from [places with] weaker currencies, and also the American interest wasn't as great, also probably to do with currency value and terrorism."

Anna Sbampato, Director of Centro Studi Idea Verona in Verona, mentions a steep drop in students from Germany last year. "The number of enrolments of German students have considerably decreased because of the economic crisis in Germany," she states.

A knock-on effect of the strength of the euro has been a shortening of the average course length. "We noticed a lower [course] duration," observes Christian Signoretto of Lingua It in Verona. "We think that the strength of the euro and the high cost of living influenced this." Similarly, at Sorrento Lingue in Sorrento, more students enrolled on courses of two weeks rather than the usual four weeks, according to Cristiana Panicco at the school.

Italian language schools attract mainly northern Europeans, US and Japanese students. With Germany and the USA contributing to the top nationalities at many schools across the country, the effect of downward spiralling numbers from these key countries brought down the overall enrolment figures at many schools in 2004. While performances varied depending on the school, there was, on the whole, little to celebrate in 2004. According to Marco Pravi at Centro Culturale Conero in Camerano, their numbers slipped by 30 per cent in 2004, while Portolani says that their enrolments mustered just a three per cent increase in 2004 and this was after a "very bad year" in 2003.

Other sources report a slightly rosier picture. Matteo Savini, Director of Istituto Venezia in Venice – which experienced an eight per cent increase in numbers in 2004 – says their enrolment levels were buoyed by new flights to the city. "[We experienced] a little growth



from north European countries, possibly because of low-cost flights," he explains.

Despite the slowdown in the US market, some schools, such as Sorrento Lingue, are stepping up their marketing activities in the USA. "This year we are primarily targeting the North American market, especially the university market," reports Panicco, who has also set up more partnerships in the UK.

With Italian culture attracting many language travellers to Italy, there is a strong trend in the market for Italian plus culture courses. But Panicco notes a change in motivation. "Our language and internship courses are most popular. We contribute this to the [fact] that students are now looking to develop a more global resumé and become

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more competitive in the job market," she explains, adding, "Students are much more focused on professional development."

Attesting to this trend is the expansion into the work placement sector at Centro Studi Idea Verona. "In collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce of Verona, we are launching a project addressed at senior or graduated students from Northern America," says Sbampato. "It is [aimed at] those who want to combine a period of study in Italy with an internship in one of the most prestigious companies in Verona."