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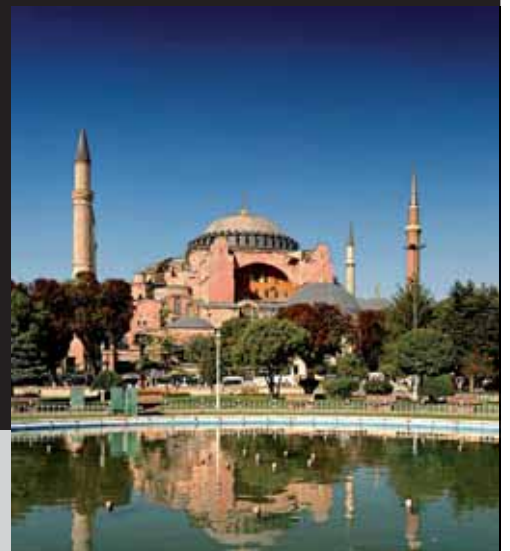
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Italy struggles

Some schools in Italy are upbeat while others foresee a battle to maintain business this year, particularly as Italian language students are increasingly booking shorter courses. A positive visa issuance policy across the board would help, as AMY BAKER discovers.

Asils takes action

One of the most established industry associations in Italy is Asils, the Associazione Scuole di Italiano come Lingua Seconda. Having usually undertaken lobbying activities on behalf of its 35-plus members, Matteo Savini, Secretary of the association, explains to *Language Travel Magazine* that the association is taking a new direction in light of the current challenges it faces.

"Asils will, for the first time, act as a marketing [strategist] and not only as a lobbyist," he reports, underlining that Asils will attempt to brand itself nationally and internationally as the quality gateway to Italian language teaching opportunities.

"We will empower our website and organise public events in order to promote the brand," he explains. "We will try to inform the market as much as possible that Asils means quality, and all agents/private customers should know where they're going, and the many advantages of choosing one of our centres," he states.

Savini adds a refrain that has been repeated before: "We will try as much as possible to be recognised [as a sector] officially by our government."

A lack of government understanding about the value of the sector is one hurdle, while the other is economic conditions that are thwarting growth. "The crisis affects our clients economically and psychologically," laments Savini.

There is a mix of emotions in Italy concerning the outlook for 2009 – some providers are hopeful, while others testify to weakening demand. For example, Lorenzo Capanni from *Accademia del Giglio* in Florence is not expecting a great year. He observes, "Apparently, potential students from all over the world seem to have less time and less money to spend abroad and those who can still afford a course in Italy are not normally in the position to stay for long periods in our country, mainly because of job reasons."

He says short, intensive and private one-to-one courses have not suffered but all other types of enrolments are definitely on the decline at his school.

With Italian having always been a language pursued by those with a passion for the country and culture as much as those with an academic or vocational bent, it is not surprising that some "fair weather" purchases may evaporate in a climate when spending power is carefully considered. Capanni concedes, "There are definitely less students who learn Italian for pleasure," noting that most of his students this year have been those who "need to learn Italian for their studies and their career".

However, at other institutions, the mood is more positive. At ALCE – Study Italian in Italy, based in Bologna, Luca Armaroli reports, "2008 was an excellent year and... in 2009, we have the same trend and good expectations for March to September."

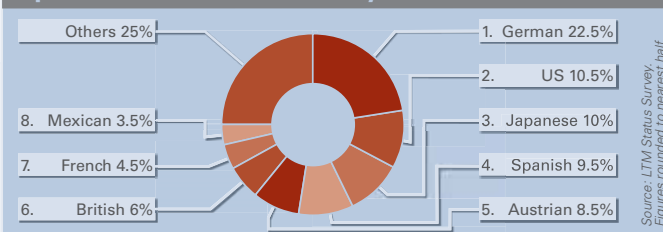
Armaroli does acknowledge, however, that the school's situation in Bologna, an old university city, may help. "Bologna has the oldest university in Europe; many students, above all, from new European Union countries, are attracted by the acceptable costs of our university degrees," he says.

Nevertheless, top nationalities at ALCE are German, Brazilian, Spanish and American, reflecting a broader recruitment pool. A very wide range of student nationalities attends the school in lesser numbers, with Romanian, Ukrainian, Czech, Polish, Estonian, Kazakhstani and Hungarian all representing Eastern Europe as well as China, Russia, Sweden, Israel, Mexico and Finland among other source countries.

At *Scuola Palazzo Malvisi*, also in Florence, a wide range of nationalities is also present, including Swiss, German, British, American, Israeli and Kazakhstani. At this school, the mood is also more sombre as the school's Director, Cesare Portolani, laments the loss of the business clients. "The number of students for 2008 has been quite satisfying, but I cannot expect that this year it could be a good year," he muses. "At the moment, all the clients sent by the companies [are missing]."



Top student nationalities in Italy, 2007



In times of crises, it is normal to congregate to resolve a problem and many schools are looking to an industry group to alleviate problems. "Our school is a member of *Eduitalia*," says Capanni. "Its aim is also to appeal to the Italian government and embassies for finding a solution to the student visa problem. Let's cross our fingers!"

Visa problems are a recurrent headache, with many student visas, particularly from smaller markets, being refused outright, according to language schools. Capanni relates, "We have student visa problems with many countries, practically all countries which are not part of Western Europe or North America. In Asia, maybe only Japanese students have few difficulties."

At *Omnilingua* in Sanremo, Daniel Pietzner – who is hopeful that enrolments will remain on an even keel – also relates that visa issuance is a problem in South America, while Armaroli cites frequent visa refusals in Russia. Capanni is not hopeful for a turn in fortune just yet: "I would bet that it is not even on the main agenda of the present government," he says, "if you also consider the more serious hardships that our country is incurring at the moment." ●