

Supporting agents

Governments are increasingly setting up agencies or supporting organisations to promote education opportunities in their countries, and many provide valuable services for agents, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

The generic promotion of study abroad opportunities is always welcomed by language travel agents. With several governments around the world pledging to support growth of their international education markets, more and more organisations have been set up to implement an overseas marketing strategy in these countries.

It is not only the main English language teaching markets that have established such initiatives. In France, for example, there is EduFrance, an agency made up of representatives from five government ministries and a variety of education providers from all sectors. It has a website and a string of local offices that provides information to students. Similarly, the German government is funding the Joint Initiative for the Promotion of Study, Research and Training, whose remit includes the worldwide promotion of German education. In Korea, too, the government is keen to increase overseas student numbers and it has enlisted the help of agency association, Kosa, to achieve its aims (see page 24).

However, with the notable exceptions of Canada and the USA – which have little or no government support for international marketing – it has been the main English-speaking study destinations that have the most developed services for agents. The Australian Trade Commission (Austrade) has offices in a variety of locations throughout the world, and although it does not offer any organisation-wide services for agents, some Austrade posts

produce newsletters about events and developments in Australia, and organise training seminars for agents. “Austrade – especially in Europe – arranges information workshops for overseas agents, usually involving local staff at our posts,” confirms Kieran Gilbert, Austrade’s Senior Media Adviser.

Groups or associations of language schools also often work with their government export agencies and/or tourist boards to conduct overseas marketing campaigns (see *Language Travel Magazine*, October 2002, pages 24-29). Earlier this year, the Irish schools’ marketing group, MEI-Relsa, took part in a trade trip to China, Korea and Japan with the Irish Navy and the government organisation, Enterprise Ireland, which included workshops and presentations for agents on a naval ship. “In Asia particularly, such high profile occasions are rated very highly and give our sector great credibility,” says Gillian Nother at MEI-Relsa.

Over the past year, Education New Zealand (EdNZ), together with the government export agency, Trade New Zealand, arranged agent seminars in South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, China and Taiwan, and hosted fam trips for agents from seven different countries. According to Lester Taylor, EdNZ’s Chief Executive, the organisation places considerable emphasis on agents in their marketing strategy as agents account for approximately 60 per cent of international student enrolments.

Close relationships between promotional groups and agents are undoubtedly beneficial to schools. “Many British Council offices have

been developing their relationships with agents over the past few years,” says Jane Lowther at the British Council, who is responsible for developing the organisation’s agent strategy. “Established training programmes are available in many countries – for example India, Taiwan and Korea – providing training on UK education products, living in the UK, entry clearance, application procedures, teaching methods and quality assurance.”

As well as organising visits and fam trips, dissemination of information is also a key role of such organisations. EdNZ produces a quarterly newsletter that is available to agents through Trade New Zealand offices overseas, and a quarterly newspaper for students, as well as publishing directories of members in a range of different languages.

The British Council is also an important source of information and support for agents in many countries. For the Chinese market, it has developed a password-protected agent network website. “This provides agents with information about the UK and counselling support as well as downloadable promotional materials,” says Lowther.

Despite its comprehensive range of agent services worldwide, the British Council has only recently defined its agent strategy (see below). “[The agent] strategy will develop flexible models for working effectively with agents, which can be used in key countries for the benefit of UK recruitment in all [education sectors],” states Lowther.

Placement problems

Problems between generic marketing bodies and agents have arisen when these organisations have extended their roles to include placement services (see Language Travel Magazine, July 2000, pages 34-35).

The British Council has in the past caused considerable resentment among agents in a number of countries over its placement schemes. Now, however, it has defined its agent strategy. Although it intends to retain its placement scheme – which is currently in operation in 30 countries – it says it is concentrating particularly on countries “where there is an underdeveloped agent network or where the majority of English in British accredited providers are not represented”.

However, agents in some countries such as Morocco (see page 9) and Taiwan remain dissatisfied with the British Council’s placement activities. Albert Lee of Taiwan’s agency association, Tosa, says their relationship with the

British Council has reached a stalemate situation now because of the British Council’s placement scheme. “I don’t know how long this Cold War will last,” he adds.

In some countries, the British Council has set up a recruitment service whereby students receive counselling and are then referred to local agents for placement. Such a scheme exists in Brazil, which Alfredo Spinola, of the Brazilian agency association, Belta, says works well. “[The] cooperation [between Belta and the British Council] has been remarkable,” he says. Jane Lowther at the British Council comments, “Ultimately this is the kind of collaborative business model we would like to move towards.”

Although not a government-sponsored organisation, IDP Education Australia has been unpopular with agents in some countries. IDP, which is a not-for-profit company owned by a number of Australian universities, acts as an agent



overseas. It processed 17,050 student applications last year. Problems have arisen because of the IDP’s association with government agencies and its assumed different status, compared with local agencies. In Taiwan, this issue was resolved by IDP registering as a private company to operate commercially. It is now a member of Tosa.