

# Canada holds on

Many education providers in Canada are facing a challenge to maintain student enrolment levels in a difficult operating environment. AMY BAKER reports.

Although many language schools in Canada point to a satisfactory market performance in 2002, not all schools are confident that year-end results will reveal an increase in student numbers. In spite of a visa regulation amendment half way through the year that allowed students to study in Canada for up to six months without a student visa, there were few factors that actually enhanced the business outlook in the short-term.

Schools point to the weakened economies in South America and a continued decline in overseas travel as factors counting against them. "I am planning on equal or decreased enrolment over last year," says Dan Dycke at Comox Valley International College (CVIC) in Courtenay. "Asians are still being a bit cautious with expenditures and I believe there is grave economic danger in the American markets such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela etc." He adds, "We all know about Argentina."

David Kuehle in Toronto agrees that Latin American enrolments did not fare well this year. Kristina Stewart, at Stewart College of Languages in Victoria, says Mexican and Brazilian numbers are holding out but she also points to an underlying "cautiousness from [all] overseas students in respect to studying in North America".

This seems to be one of the key challenges facing the Canadian language teaching market. Patrick Davis, General Manager of Study Abroad Canada, says the industry needs to "convince people that it is okay to fly and that they should invest in themselves".

However, while Davis expects autumn enrolments to be down 20 per cent, with a return to 2001 enrolment levels forecast for 2003, some schools did report a



good performance this year. At Seneca College's English Language Institute in North York, Ontario, Martine Allard says, "We had a slight decrease in new enrolments this year, but our overall numbers were higher." She adds, "2003 looks strong so far. For the Chinese market, everything depends on students' ability to obtain visas."

Allard underlines a key distinction between institutions in Canada's language teaching market. Public-sector institutions are able to recruit Chinese students, while private institutions not offering further academic study are currently unable to (see right).

"The Chinese market has been very strong for the last two years and the Korean market is slowly bouncing back," confirms Allard. Dycke, however, points to increases in Korean, Swiss, German and Spanish student numbers at his school.

Nationality diversity in the classroom is becoming an issue for schools, as students from particular markets peak or dwindle. "Our biggest challenge [for 2003] will continue to be increased diversity in our student body," acknowledges Allard.

Another challenge seems to be a trend towards late bookings. "Students now book later, or not at all," laments Davis, while

Stewart adds, "People are committing closer to the start date and for shorter periods." Virginia Christopher, President of the Private English Language Schools' Association (Pelsa), is hopeful that the new visa rule will attract students for a longer duration. "Now, three months is the average period of study, but we hope that this increases," she says. "The [rule] change came in June, and over the summer, students tend to register for shorter periods to coincide with their holidays. Autumn and next spring will be more telling."

At Smith English School in Edmonton, Steven Smith has developed an interesting initiative to attract longer-term bookings from students. "We are trying to keep our students by offering a monthly discount if they stay after three months," he explains.

Besides individual school initiatives, providers are also working with associations such as Pelsa, which is aiming to establish quality standards for English language programmes in association with Tesl Canada. And Dycke reports that there is governmental support for the industry now. "There were some obstacles, but our governments, federal and provincial, are working to understand and become full supporters of this industry," he says.

## Chinese challenge

For private English language schools, one of the greatest problems facing them is the decision by the immigration services not to allow Chinese students to enrol at their institutions, while post-secondary institutions offering language and further academic training can accept Chinese applications.

Lorraine Marigold, at Vancouver Community College, says, "We public schools and those private universities which have [English language provision] plus academics are inundated", although she adds that Chinese students are welcome, as student numbers from Japan, Colombia and Argentina decline.

Virginia Christopher, President of Pelsa, which represents private language schools, is keen to change this current situation and is currently lobbying the government.

"Immigration Canada erroneously believes that students will claim refugee status if they attend non-public schools," she says. "Of course, this is untrue. Those [students] who plan to claim refugee status make those plans before leaving home. The school has no effect on the decision."

According to figures from the Canadian Bureau of International Education's National Report 2000/2001, China and Korea were the second-most important sources of international students in Canada in 2000/2001, after the USA. Both countries sent over 6,000 students to study in Canada (excluding short-term students enrolled for under three months).

However, the report warned that while Asia remained the top source region, representing just under half of all international students in Canada, there were 6,000 fewer Asian students overall, compared with the same survey 10 years ago. The Chinese market for language travel is booming around the world, but it seems that many Canadian schools are being denied the opportunity to seize their share of the market.