

Canada plummets

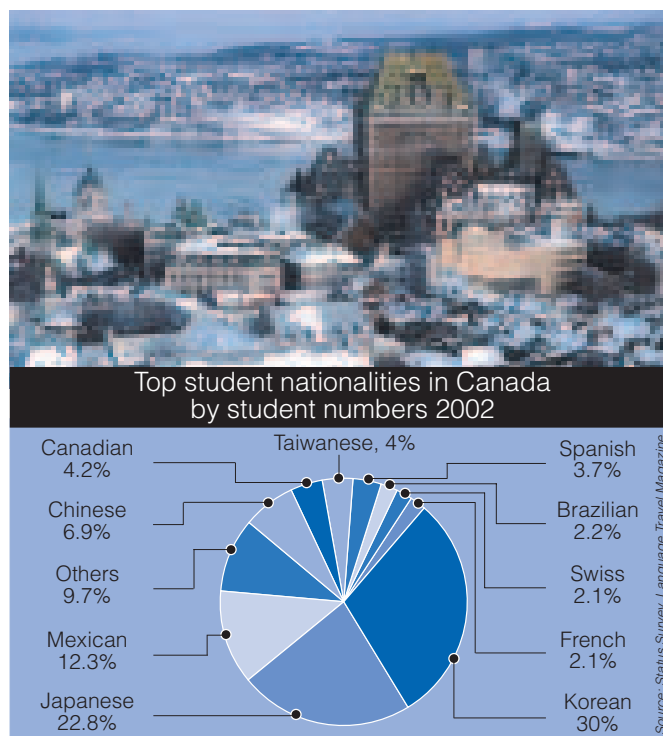
The prospect for Canadian language schools was looking bright, until the Sars outbreak sent student numbers tumbling in the first half of 2003. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

A good performance in 2002 for the Canadian language teaching industry and a favourable start to 2003 has been overshadowed this year by the effects on the market of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars). The Sars outbreak, which began in Southeast Asia, soon spread to Canada. Although Sars claimed only 32 victims there, it had a devastating effect on the industry in the first six months of 2003, as high profile mass media reports spread around the world and the World Health Organisation issued a warning against travel to Toronto.

"Sars, or more accurately, the perception created by the Sars outbreak, has had a significant impact on the market in Canada, and Toronto in particular," confirms Anthony Stille of the English School in Canada, situated in Toronto, Ontario. "May and June were slow months for most schools." Barry Beale, of the Canadian Academy in Toronto, Ontario, is typical of schools in the area when he reports a 50 per cent drop in student enrolments in the first half of 2003.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of Sars outbreaks were concentrated in the Ontario area, the Canadian language teaching industry throughout the country suffered a drop in overall student numbers. Janine Rossi, Manager of Banff Education Centre (BEC) in Canmore, Alberta, reports, "The Sars outbreak had a very serious effect on student enrolment in Canmore and throughout Canada. The Japanese market was the most hesitant to enrol during this time."

Stille adds that numbers from Taiwan declined because of Sars. "Taiwan is a market [in which] we were just beginning to develop some good exposure and then Sars hit. We now have to go back



and firm up what we did there [previously]," he comments.

Sources forecast that some schools, particularly in the Toronto area, may have to close because of their losses. However, many others are riding out the rest of the year, supported by their good performances in 2002. Last year, student numbers were buoyed by the low Canadian dollar compared to the US dollar and a change in visa regulations (see right). Many sources were also reaping the rewards of aggressive marketing strategies.

"In 2002, we saw an overall increase in student numbers, particularly in the Mexican and Brazilian markets," reports Catherine Bolter at Vancouver Language College International, in Vancouver, British Columbia. "This increase is due to a number of factors [including] attendance at education fairs and an overall rise in registrations generated from our website."

But it was not only some Latin American markets that picked up for Canadian language schools in 2002. Beale reports a rise in Saudi Arabian students, and Bolter mentions an increase in Chinese students before Sars hit the market, despite the fact that legislative factors are still hampering growth of the market for private institutions.

To get around the obstructions, private language providers are increasingly going into partnership with universities and colleges to enable them to accept Chinese applicants, as Rossi explains. "Schools that have an affiliated programme with an accredited university or college are able to receive students from China," she says. "More schools in Canada are trying to develop partnerships so that they will be able to expand their markets."

For schools able to survive, growth is predicted in 2004, but all are keen to move on from 2003.

Course trends

The more lenient visa regulations, which were introduced in Canada last year, allow all students to study in Canada without a student visa for up to six months. "The changes to visa issuance in Canada have made studying here more attractive to students," asserts Janine Rossi of Banff Education Centre in Canmore, Alberta. "Students are more apt to study for longer periods of time."

However, in 2003, many schools did not find that the new regulations had much of an impact on their enrolments. At the International Language Academy of Canada in Toronto, Ontario, Jonathan Kolber says, "Students from Korea and Japan are booking shorter courses – three months instead of six". Although this has resulted in the average length of stay for the school dropping from 16 weeks to 10 weeks, many students extend their stays. "With [students extending their stays] it is not so bad," adds Kolber.

As in most other English-speaking countries, there is rising demand in Canada for vocational and academic courses, and new programmes have been developed by schools to meet demand.

"For us, the new course is for those wanting to prepare for the Canadian [high] school system," reports John Lowndes of Sea to Sea English College in Surrey, British Columbia. This four-month long course includes lessons about Canadian culture and living in Canada as well as classes in English, maths and science.

Anthony Stille at English in Canada in Toronto, Ontario, says, "We have noticed a higher demand for specific English language training such as Tesol, academic preparation and test preparation." As a result, the school launched a Tesol programme at the beginning of 2003 and is planning to open a tourism and hospitality programme later this year to meet demand.