

# Malta's challenge

While English language student numbers were up in 2004, and the outlook for 2005 is good, the Maltese industry nevertheless has a challenge to face, with possible taxation of host families likely to create change. AMY BAKER reports.

## Feltom updates standards

Maltese school association, Feltom, has decided to improve its accreditation standards and is hoping that the government will eventually follow its lead and raise minimum operating standards for all schools. President John Dimech told *Language Travel Magazine* that Feltom believes the new scheme will "set Malta apart from the competition." He adds, "Much of the [current] EFL legislation was originally instituted by Feltom and then adopted by the government."

Currently, 17 of close to 50 schools that are licensed to operate by the Maltese government are members of Feltom. However, Dimech says these 17 members "represent 72 per cent of all the ELT students who come to Malta to follow English language courses."

The new scheme covers areas such as premises and environment; teaching and learning; and promotional material. It states that in-service development of teaching staff must be carried out and observation of teaching staff with feedback should be provided. Other stipulations include the fact that refund processes should be clearly explained to students via agents and self-access study resources should be made available at convenient times.

The accreditation scheme will be introduced on January 1, 2008 on a mandatory basis. Until then, the scheme will be offered as a voluntary arrangement and Feltom will subsidise the accreditation costs to encourage members to undergo the process.

English language student numbers in Malta were up in 2004, according to National Statistics Office figures, with a growth of 4.4 per cent on the previous year. And the upward trend continued into 2005, according to a number of schools in the country.

"This year we have been improving every month on our statistics both in student weeks and in the number of students," relates Louiseanne Mercieca of English Language Academy in Sliema. "Our best performance has been in the Spanish and Hungarian markets. This is as a result of new agents we have made contacts with."

At NSTS English Language Institute in Gzira, Francis Stivala reports that the school has also seen a continued growth in numbers. "We witnessed good growth in Germany and Switzerland, both up by 33 per cent, and a return of the Italian market, our second strongest, up 66 per cent after a slack [performance] in 2004," he reports. "We also had good numbers from France, up by over 50 per cent."

While the most significant student markets for Malta are other European countries, schools are hopeful that their recruiting efforts, and the efforts of the government in re-establishing normal visa processes in China – after an incident involving migrants travelling to Italy illegally from Malta resulted in a suspension of visa services – will mean a more diverse student mix in the future. "We foresee a rise in Chinese bookings once the Maltese Embassy is running normally again after a change of staff a couple of months ago," says Andrew Grech from the newly opened Chamber College in Gzira.

Grech reports that their largest nationality groups last year were Turkish, Chinese and Libyan, reflecting the fact that Malta does in fact attract less significant numbers from a wide range of other smaller student markets. This view is supported by Kathleen vom Schloss Cremona at Inlingua School of Languages in Sliema, who notes that bookings from Turkey, China, the Czech Republic and Japan have increased this year.

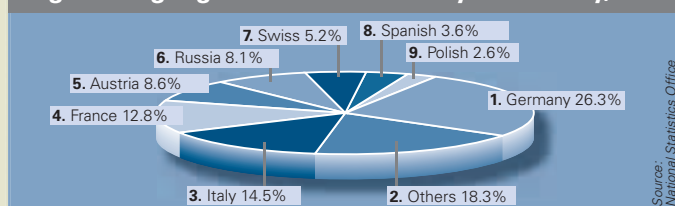
While marketing in many areas is being stepped up by schools – Paul Fenech at Magister Academy in St Julians says they are making an "ongoing and growing investment in our marketing strategy" – there are nevertheless visa problems in countries other than China that are holding back the market. Fenech relates, "We lose 95 per cent of our winter long-haul and long-term market and 80 per cent of our 'shoulder period' clients because of unexplained visa refusals in non-EU countries."

The Maltese government certainly takes an interest in and keeps an eye on its English language teaching (ELT) industry, which accounts for five per cent of total tourism arrivals. However,



PHOTOGRAPH: MALTA TOURISM AUTHORITY

English language student in Malta by nationality, 2004



Source: National Statistics Office

its attention, while leading to an overhaul of practice at the embassy in Beijing (as detailed above), has brought other problems for the industry to contend with. Earlier this year, the government announced that it was planning to tax host families on any profit earned, possibly retrospectively.

Feltom's John Dimech told *Language Travel Magazine* that the government has decided to wait until after the busy summer season to work with all parties concerned to come up with a solution. Dimech suggested that families receiving less than 4,000 Maltese lira (US\$11,612) per year would not be likely to pay tax.

However, according to news stories, the government announcement alone prompted many families to decide it was not worthwhile hosting students, leading to a shortage of host families and more students lodged in hotel accommodation this year. Schools are waiting for the outcome of the tax debate but some are certain that it will be detrimental. "The taxation of the families means that a lot of families will not view hosting as being worth the hassle any more, which will leave the schools with a lack of families to work with, particularly in summer when there are barely enough families to go around in the first place," warns Grech. ●