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Comme çï comme ça

Mixed reports from France suggest patchy business growth, with some schools faring well this year and last while others are reporting a slowdown in enrolments. All providers are approaching course provision creatively, however, to bolster sales. NICOLA HANCOX reports.

Nationality stakes

"The euro is very dear [expensive] for nationalities like Japan, Korea and Brazil," reports Jean François Vouilloux, from Ecole France Langue in Paris. Consequently the number of students from these two world regions has fallen dramatically in the last few years. In 2005, Korean students accounted for 21 per cent of the nationality spectrum in French schools, according to our Status survey, yet in 2007 this figure dwindled to just 2.7 per cent (see LTM, June 2008, page 48).

However, the number of Chinese students travelling to France to learn the language has not been affected. In 2006, our Status survey revealed that just three per cent of the nationality mix was Chinese in origin, but in 2007 this rose by 3.7 percentage points to 6.7 per cent. A rise in numbers has led some institutions to take drastic action. "We have had to limit registrations [from Chinese students]," notes Karine Joly-Patrouillault from the Institut Savoisien d'Etudes Françaises pour Etrangers (ISEFE) at the Université de Savoie in Chambéry. "They may be the last students to learn French and they are numerous!" she exclaims.

However, after highly publicised protests during the Paris leg of the Olympic torch relay, there have been reports that France – considered the most popular European destination among Chinese holidaymakers – may be affected by a drop in inbound tourism (see LTM, August 2008, page 12).

There are mixed reviews surrounding how French language schools have fared over the past year or so. Some providers report that student growth was sluggish in 2007 while others relate that, on the whole, student numbers performed well.

Ignacio Colmenares, Manager of L'Atelier 9 in Paris, notes that business grew by as much as 35 per cent in 2007, but that numbers will consequently slow in 2009. "We expect a slow down in enrolments," he says. "The reason is very simple: we have reached our highest capacity of growth due to the size of the school." Eleri Maitland from French in Normandy in Rouen also reports a hike in student numbers (up 20 per cent in the first six months of 2008) and a substantial increase in summer bookings this year (up 23 per cent). "This summer, we were full for four weeks so we would like to improve on that."

However, for others, the past 12 months have been far from fruitful and Ute Nanninga from IP International Projects (with a language centre in Biarritz) says that there was a sharp decline in the number of students opting to learn French in 2007. "It's like fishing in murky waters," she states. "There was a 27 per cent decrease in 2007 in comparison to 2006," she observes, adding that lacklustre tourism in the region may have inadvertently affected enrolments at the school. "After many booming years at the Côte d'Azur guests did not find the service they require and consequently feel they are not getting value for money any more," she says.

An increasingly strong euro could also be hampering business from certain student markets. "The lowest enrolments come from Asia, South America and Eastern Europe," observes Colmenares. "I feel this is due to financial reasons." Several other schools also report a sudden drop in the number of Asian students journeying to France for study purposes with students from within the European Union picking up the slack and US business remaining stable.

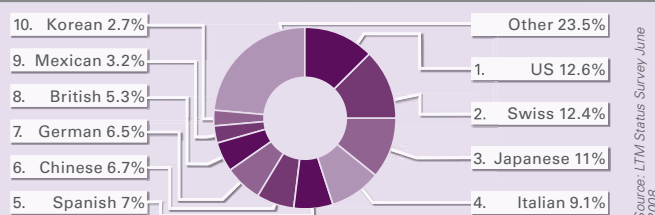
Colmenares relates that German, British, Spanish, Irish, Dutch, Italian and Danish students were far more numerous this year. "We feel that this is mostly due to the euro/dollar exchange rate that has brought us more EU students," he testifies.

Language schools are responding positively to any market ambivalence with an array of specialised courses and activity programmes. Nanninga notes that they have utilised their location in Biarritz by offering students the chance to take a one-week surfing course at their partner school in Anglet. Meanwhile, at French in Normandy, students can now consider a French plus beauty course or a French plus fashion programme. The school has also taken steps to exclude products that weren't working. "We are going to drop our holiday course – combining activities – as no one wants it and [instead]



PHOTOGRAPH: PARIS TOURIST OFFICE

Top student nationalities in France by student weeks, 2007



Source: LTM Status Survey, June 2008

we'll put all effort into our facilities and daily activities," says Maitland.

Nearby, Dominique Waag, Director of Alliance Française Rouen-Normandie, suggests that group courses are the way forward. "We have been creating some group courses – especially for young children – which are quite successful," she relates. She adds that the school has launched a course for foreign teachers of French that has also been well received.

Schools are a little cautious when it comes to predicting the future. Karine Joly-Patrouillault from the Institut Savoisien d'Etudes Françaises pour Etrangers (ISEFE) at the Université de Savoie in Chambéry believes that schools could be fighting a losing battle. "I do not think the government helps foreign students to learn French [enough]. The visas are difficult to get and the language is not as popular as English or Spanish," she claims.

Jean-François Vouilloux, from France Langue in Paris, however, disagrees, pointing to the government-backed quality label now in use. "The government's [quality] language policy can help spread [the word about] French," he says. "2006 was a bad year, 2007 was better and 2008 may be a good vintage." ●