

US concerns

Following the September 11 attacks on the USA last year, which severely affected international student enrolment, the US English language teaching industry is still trying to find its feet. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Within the international education industry in the USA, the English language teaching sector has suffered the most severe fallout from the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In a survey conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in November 2001 to determine the effects of September 11 on the market, one respondent noted, 'The drop in [English language] programmes echoes the impact of the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98.'

In the first nine months of 2001, many English language providers were doing well, reporting growth in student numbers of up to 40 per cent, despite the strength of the US dollar and the general economic slowdown in many countries around the world.

But the September events sent the market reeling. Even now, almost a year later, many international students are choosing alternative countries such as Australia and New Zealand for their English training, owing to concerns over safety and difficulties obtaining US visas.

'Our numbers have dropped significantly, especially [for the] spring quarter and the summer quarter,' says Steve Horowitz of the UESL Program at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington State. '[Numbers are] down 50 per cent from last year.'

Clark Egnor, Director of the English as a Second Language Institute at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, paints a similar picture. 'We had a 20 per cent drop in enrolment and applications for [our English language course starting in January 2002],' he reports. 'We expect another enrolment decline for summer 2002 - applications are down about 30 per cent.' However, he is confident that student numbers will bounce



back to pre-September 11 levels by autumn. 'Fall enrolments look like they will be back up to the same level as last year,' he says.

Although the terrorist attacks of last year have certainly rocked the market, Norma King from the English Language Center at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado, suggests that a number of other factors have contributed to the market's poor performance.

In addition to concerns about safety and uncertainty about getting student visas - because of 'new regulations rumoured and discussed' - King points to increased competition within the English language teaching industry in the USA; economic uncertainty in Asian markets; and more in-country language schools in the Middle East.

Generally, the USA attracts a high proportion of Asian students, especially from Japan, Korea and Taiwan, while Latin America has been its star performer in recent years. However, safety concerns have affected some of the USA's core markets. According to Japanese agency chain, ICS, which analysed the impact of the September events on their market, there was a 40 per cent drop in bookings for short-term courses in the USA in October 2001 (see *Language Travel Magazine*, Feb-

ruary 2002 page 12).

Egnor's experience confirms this. 'We cancelled a short-term programme in March that a university in Tokyo has sent students to for the past eight years. That university decided to send our students to New Zealand this year.' But he adds, 'The university has informed us that they will resume the programme next spring.'

At the University of Denver's English Language Center, King reports that, in 2001, Middle East applications in particular were down. '[We] lost Middle East students - some of whom returned in the winter quarter - [and we] lost Asian and Latin American potential students for fear of safety in the USA.'

On a more positive note, Rhonda Seidman, from Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, says that the number of Korean students has increased this year, owing to 'their stronger economy'.

Despite some evidence to suggest that demand is picking up again, many sources remain cautious in their forecasts of the market's future performance. '[The outlook for 2002] is anyone's guess,' says King. 'It doesn't look good. Keeping programmes open is the challenge.'

Mixed feelings about Sevis

An inquiry by a US Justice Department into the monitoring and tracking of international students in the USA has branded the current paper-based system used by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) as 'antiquated and inadequate'.

To alleviate the 10-month backlog of paperwork at INS and improve the situation in the future, the US government is introducing the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (Sevis).

Institutions that accept international students will have to submit up-to-date information about students, such as their address, their major and whether they leave school or are expelled.

Although the international education community acknowledges that tighter regulations are required, reaction to Sevis is mixed. 'I am hoping that Sevis will not make things worse, but I can't imagine it will help with enrolment. It can only add to the frustration and fears of potential students,' says Steve Horowitz of the UESL Program at Central Washington University.

But Clark Egnor of the Intensive English Program at Marshall University, says, 'Sevis will raise the cost of education for international students initially, but in the long-term it should be a healthy thing, in that it will reduce the abuses and give both schools and the government more control over the flow of enrolment.'

Andrea Fuchs, President of AF International School of Languages, is also optimistic about Sevis. 'I think Sevis will have a positive effect [on the market] in the long run,' she says. 'After implementation of Sevis, enrolment will pick up and continue to do so.'

Sevis is scheduled to be implemented by January 30, 2003, although the Justice Department believes it is 'unlikely' that the INS will meet this deadline.