

US market in trouble

Student numbers dropped significantly last year for most English language providers in the USA, and many are investing in agent relations as well as other marketing activities to try and improve business performance this year. AMY BAKER reports.

Last year was a bad year all round for language schools in the USA, according to respondents for this Market Report feature. Joan Sears, Assistant Director of the Intensive English Programme (IEP) at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, typifies experience when she says that her IEP saw a 50 per cent drop in enrolment in 2002.

Guido Schillig, Managing Director at Anglo-Continental in the USA, also reports falling numbers at their schools. 'At our all-year centre, which caters for adults on intensive programmes, student numbers dropped by only 25 per cent [while] at our residential summer vacation programme at Tufts University, which caters for language students aged between 15 and 22, our student numbers fell by two thirds.'

Most schools point to the same factors being responsible for a significant drop in business - economic problems around the world, fears about safety since September 11, 2001 and, chiefly, visa problems. Des Levin, President of Talk International in Fort Lauderdale, Florida - which saw an overall drop in business of 30 per cent last year - says, 'In the beginning of 2002, the major issue was students' concern regarding safety issues and the threat of terrorism, plus the strong dollar. Towards the end of the year, the increasingly complex process of obtaining a visa to travel to the USA became the main problem.'

Schillig adds, 'America has not been 'flavour of the month' with students wanting to learn English. American embassies have, understandably, been stricter about issuing student visas. The bottom line is that students have chosen other destinations to learn English.' But Schillig is optimistic. 'Studying in America is still a dream for many



students and they are beginning to return,' he says. 'In 2003, our student numbers have improved almost as quickly as they dropped in 2002.'

Other language programme directors are not quite as optimistic. Jim Hamrick at the University of Tennessee's English Language Institute observes that applications are still down by 25 per cent, while visa denials are up. Sears concurs. 'Summer 2003 has low enrolment due in part to difficulty getting into the country and in part because students already here are not required to study in summer,' she reports.

Colleen McCune, at the University of California Irvine's English and Certificate Programmes for Internationals (ECPI), suggests that student demand varies depending on a student's area of interest. In her experience, straightforward English language programme enrolments for 2003 have been lower, while 'certificate [programmes] and custom programmes seem to be doing the same or better than last year'.

Providing a range of good quality English language programmes to suit different requirements is one way that schools hope to remain competitive. But at Intrax English Institute in Chicago, Illinois, Tigran Muradyan - who reports

improving student numbers last year - points to good working relationships with agents as another success factor. 'Each quarter, all of our agents receive updates on every [Intrax] centre's activities that include changes in pricing strategies, student activities, new partnerships, new educational programmes, etc,' she relates.

Traditionally, it has been the Asian markets of Japan, Korea and Taiwan that have represented the majority of students in American programmes. While numbers overall have been down, Asian students remain the most populous. McCune states simply, 'Japan, Korea and Taiwan are the top three', while Hamrick also notes Thailand as one of the stronger nationalities at his centre.

At Talk International, Levin says it was Middle Eastern numbers that suffered the most last year, with numbers down by 80 per cent. Students from South and Central America dropped by 40 per cent, while Western Europeans were down by 20 per cent. Schools are generally keen to maintain a mix of student nationalities in class, even in these difficult times. At UC Irvine, McCune says student recruitment methods remain unchanged, 'but we are trying to offer more incentives to countries with lower populations in our programmes'.

CEA gains government approval

US language schools don't have much to smile about when it comes to points in their favour at the moment, but some good news has come from the US Department of Education. Its National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity has recognised the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) as an accrediting agency for US English language teaching programmes.

CEA has become the second agency - and the first specialised agency - able to offer such accreditation. The other agency is the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (Accet), which has been recognised since 1978.

CEA sought recognition as both a programmatic and institutional accrediting agency, which means that it can accredit both intensive English programmes in colleges and universities and independent language teaching institutions.

'The fact that there is now a specialised accrediting agency for English language programmes in the USA should be good news to students and sponsors,' said Terry O'Donnell, Executive Director of the commission. 'They can use the list of CEA-accredited schools [when they are] choosing a quality language programme.'

She explained that CEA's standards, policies and procedures are focused on best practices in the field of English language teaching and administration, noting 'CEA accreditation inevitably leads to programme improvement through application of CEA standards and the peer review process'.

All English language programmes and institutions in the country must be certified by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in order to issue I-20 forms to students, which are needed for student visa application. The easiest way to achieve DHS certification is by being accredited by a Department of Education-approved agency.