

News Release

Language centres buck the economic trend, survey finds

19 December 2008

English language centres in the UK are overwhelmingly positive about business prospects for early 2009, despite the economic downturn.

Ninety per cent expect business to remain good or improve during the first quarter of next year, and even among centres reporting lower bookings a significant minority remain optimistic.

Most UK language centres experienced a dramatic upturn in business during 2008, and the sector expects to benefit further from the falling value of the pound which will make it particularly good value to learn English here.

"Exchange rates have made the UK much more affordable as a study destination. Combined with our reputation for quality in education, this now makes the learning English in the UK unbeatable value for money," said Tony Millns, Chief Executive of language teaching association English UK.

The survey covered 101 of English UK's 390 member centres during early December 2008. Over half a million language students come here annually, contributing £1.5bn to the British economy, and the sector has grown by 30 per cent in the past three years.

Half of the centres surveyed said bookings for early 2009 were good, and comparable to the past two years. Almost 40 per cent expected bookings to increase, and of those a quarter anticipated significant improvements. Centres anticipating the biggest rises in business were more likely to be outside London, in locations including the South-West and Scotland.

One south coast centre, which did not want to be named, says bookings are up by 25 per cent, whilst one London language centre is moving to new premises in order to capitalise on new business.

"We're hesitant about being positive because of the extreme situation around us, and we have kept on thinking it might be about to crumble - but it hasn't yet," says Peter Tamkin, acting principal of The English Language Centre in Brighton.

Business has improved significantly during the past two years for his school and he expects this trend to continue into 2009. "It all seems a bit unreal," he says. "All you see in the media, everyone suffering and saying it's going to get worse. And we're coming away from work every day with things going really well. We're quietly confident."

Centres believe the profile of their students may change dramatically as a result of the worldwide recession. Korean students for example may be badly affected by the falling value of their currency. However, more European students are expected to fill the gap as the pound's near-parity with the euro makes it much better value to learn English in the UK rather than in other English-speaking countries.

John Barnett, secretary of the English UK Eastern Region group and chairman of the Business English UK sub-group says: "The value of the pound is helping. It is a key advantage for new business, and the UK is well placed now compared with several international competitors.

"This is the thing to make use of. In the past we were much more expensive than the US, Canada, Australia. A Swiss agent could send someone to Australia for 12 weeks and that would still be cheaper than the UK but it is not like that any more."

While he said centres in his area had experienced an unusually good autumn and bookings looked good for next year, he expressed slight concerns about some specialist areas of the industry. "The corporate sector is a worry, and I know of three members offering business English in small groups whose bookings are down for the first quarter.

"The training budget is the first thing that's cut when companies are having difficulty. But the weak pound could help. A good 80 per cent of the business English sector is in Euroland so we must be benefiting there."

Siân Choma-Peters, director of Ceran UK in Warwickshire, has also noticed a slight drop in enrolments among senior business people for early 2009. "Some of the people who would normally come to us are trying to keep their business going and are needed. But people do tend to book later on these courses, and it might change by the time we get there."

However, other centres surveyed said business English courses were selling well with general courses down a little.

Notes to editors

1. Of the 101 language schools asked about bookings for the first quarter of 2009, 8.9 per cent said they were significantly better, 29.7 per cent said they were better and 51.4 per cent said they were generally good and comparable to 2007 and 2008.
2. 6.9 per cent reported worse bookings. A further 2.9 per cent with lower bookings were nevertheless optimistic that they would improve.
3. English UK is the world's leading language teaching association, with 390 accredited centres in membership. It covers university and further education college language departments, international study centres in independent schools, educational trusts and charities, and private sector colleges. English UK is a UK registered charity.
4. Over 500,000 students a year come to the UK to learn English, contributing about £1.5 billion to the UK economy in course fees, accommodation and general spending. The UK has the largest share (over 30%) of this important global market. Many students go on from English language courses to UK degrees or professional qualifications. There are long-term affinity benefits to Britain as well since many students go on to be opinion-leaders and senior figures in their own countries.