

News Release  
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## **Cautious optimism at English UK annual conference**

A surprising rise in bookings during the first quarter of this year, positive news about the extended student visitor visa, and a stronger performance than expected in 2011 all contributed to a cautiously positive atmosphere at the English UK conference.

Chair Sue Edwards talked about a "huge positive opportunity" for members despite the current challenging times, whilst chief executive Tony Millns revealed that statistics from almost a quarter of members showed a four per cent rise in trade during the first three months of 2012, compared with the previous year.

However, the 2011 figures had shown the first drop since 2005, with like-for-like private sector student weeks down by 2.4 per cent (5.3 per cent using raw data) on the previous year. Adult student weeks were down by 7 per cent, whilst juniors courses were up 21 per cent. The state sector also saw a drop of 5.3 per cent.

"The figures show a degree of volatility... there are bigger fluctuations than normal," said Mr Millns. He added: "The EU is buoyant, perhaps because of the troubled Euro. If you can't get a job in Spain or Portugal, you may as well go abroad and get qualified to get a job somewhere else, and English language schools are a good component of better qualifications."

Mr Millns also told the conference that English UK's researches had discovered that bogus colleges had "largely gone" and that the Extended Student Visitor Visa had been much used by a group of members, who had found an average refusal rate of 8 per cent, that 85 per cent of students had reached level B1, and that 93 per cent had returned home to apply for a further UK study visa.

While he was delighted by recent positive publicity for reports on international students (see note 2) showing the importance of the English Language sector to the UK university route, he was concerned how the Government would react to stubbornly high immigration statistics.

"The most determined fantasist knows immigration targets will not be met: what will government do about that? What will they do next year if they are serious about making progress?" he asked.

Neil Hughes, the UKBA's National Lead for Temporary Migration, told the conference he did not expect any major restructuring in the student visa system and thought the "heavy lifting" had been done.

He said the ESVV "seems to be operating really well" and said the reason it had not been put in the Immigration Rules was that the UKBA wanted to ensure that this route was not abused. "We're going to review the ESVV as part of an overall review... that hasn't got going yet so I can't give any promises but we're quite content with what's happening on the ESVV. We aren't seeing enormous evidence of abuse or displacement so while I can't give any

promises about review that hasn't actually happened yet I think ...the ESVV will be around for a while."

He confirmed that some visa applicants would face interviews to test their language level, but said that as far as possible these would be conducted face-to-face.

Jonathan Portes, the former chief economist at the Cabinet Office who now heads the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, was trenchant in his criticism of government policy towards international students.

"The Government view is fundamentally contradictory," he said, wondering whether immigration minister Damian Green would welcome news that exports in this sector had dwindled again at the same time that the Chancellor was talking about the importance of export-led growth.

"Frankly I think it's contradictory and economically damaging and I think it's very important that it's not just your sector but economists like me stand up and show this very clearly."

Adding that the previous government also had "a two-faced attitude" to the sector, Mr Portes said many MPs were still fixated on manufacturing as necessary for an export-led recovery, whilst the UK was in reality now a service economy, with education something that "we're good at. This sector is where growth is going to come from."

He said: "When one of your students goes into a cafe and has a cup of coffee, that's an export."

Mr Portes was not entirely gloomy. "My view none of this is as yet anywhere near irreversible either to the sector or the economy as a whole. The problem is that government policy can be quite difficult to turn round, and it can be a year or two before government realises the damage it's been doing."

Friendly MPs gave English UK members some cross-party support at their annual Parliamentary Reception, held the evening before the conference. MPs present included Mark Lazarowicz, Caroline Lucas, Julian Brazier, Steve Brine, and Robert Syms, who hosted the event.

Mr Syms, addressing the reception, saluted English UK members as creators of jobs and wealth for the country. "We want to provide growth and jobs where other industries find it difficult. You are wealth creators for our country and we need greater understanding from the Border Agency and the Government."

He added: "We've got to get over the Government how important this is," explaining that he and his colleagues spent much time lobbying on the issues.

This year's conference, sponsored by Cambridge ESOL, was held in the grand surroundings of London's Russell Hotel on May 23 and 24. With 160 delegates and a third more exhibitors than before, it had outgrown its previous venues.

## **Notes to Editors**

1. English UK is the world's leading language teaching association, with more than 450 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 ([www.englishuk.com](http://www.englishuk.com)).

2. Tony Millns referred to the IPPR's report, *International Students and Net Migration in the UK*, published in May, which pointed out that the UK's three main competitors for international students -- the US, Australia and Canada -- choose to classify them as temporary migrants. He also referred to the recent Knowledge Partnership report which found that which finds that half of all international applications at undergraduate level originate from within the UK.
3. For more information, please contact Tony Millns, Chief Executive of English UK on [Tony@EnglishUK.com](mailto:Tony@EnglishUK.com) or 020 7608 7960.