

News Release
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Government strategy and industry predictions are highlights of English UK's annual conference

News on the future of the extended student visitor visa, inside information from the government's international education export strategy, and projections for the global ELT market to 2020 were just some of the highlights English UK's annual conference.

The overall message was one of a surprisingly positive outlook, despite the UK's visa restrictions and the financial downturn in many parts of the world.

"It was a pretty good year overall," said Tony Millns, chief executive, in his review of 2012, going on to talk about the twin concerns of the future of the Extended Student Visitor Visa and the ISI inspection system.

He said there was a "general acceptance in the Home Office that there isn't significant abuse of the ESVV or SVV routes, and the former will need to be written into the Immigration Rules, so watch this space."

A comparison of ISI and Accreditation UK reports demonstrated that ISI was less rigorous by one whole grade out of four, with far fewer points to be addressed -- but at four times the cost. "We continue to lobby the immigration minister about this," he said, adding that the problem appeared to be that the civil service did not recognise the British Council as an inspection body, despite the fact that it had been performing this role for 30 years.

Fran Spawls, a senior figure in the BIS international education export strategy for ELT, outlined its thinking. "It looks like there are big opportunities for international students across all the sectors, growing demand for provision, and the UK is still a very attractive place for students to come."

She talked of growing demand for in-country provision, and the importance of raising the profile of UK education and raising brand recognition of universities and companies.

There was a "really big opportunity for the UK" in supporting a systemic approach to capacity building and improving the education system of other countries.

Samuel Vetrak of Student Marketing presented a huge English UK-commissioned research project on ELT trends to 2020.

He said that the UK was dependent on short-term courses from European markets, and that if as a study destination it managed to increase the average length of stay by one week it would deliver 450,000 student weeks a year, the 20 per cent growth required to maintain or increase market share.

If current trends continued, he said, the UK market would be 40 per cent juniors by 2020.

On pricing, he said schools would have to find "creative solutions" as margins were already low and demand levels moderate. This might include dynamic pricing.

He said the UK was maintaining its market share but other destinations were promoting themselves more. Visa processing times would become increasingly important.

He predicted consolidation in the sector: at present, 50 per cent of schools are in the top 30 mainstream city destinations, and that was expected to grow as investors wanted schools in major destinations. The school market would have more buyouts and takeovers, with at least 200 acquisitions by 2020.

Centres would need to attract students with online presentations. "Customers want to touch what they buy. There will be video tours. A sexy website will be something to have as the pressure is on."

English UK chair Sue Edwards, noting the diversity of the conference, said: "What struck me on the first day is that we are learning from what we already know, thinking about current challenges but looking to the future."

Delegate John Lyons of the University of the Arts said: "It's been very good, and I think better than last year's. The conference is one that benefits everyone -- for marketing people like me, sales directors, it's more geared to market intelligence."

Andy Johnson of the London School of English was enjoying his first annual conference. "It's been very useful. I am moving from a teaching to a development role, which is quite a steep learning curve, and this is great."

Pamela Baxter of Cambridge English Language Assessment, which supports the Annual Conference, told delegates: "We're absolutely delighted to partner with you. It's an incredible opportunity for us."

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).
2. For more information, please contact Tony Millns, Chief Executive of English UK on tony@englishuk.com.