English UK Covid-19 position paper: calling on the government to help kickstart UK ELT

March 2021 (second edition)
July 2020 (first edition)

FOREWORD

English language teaching was one of the first UK industries to be hit by Covid-19, and may be one of the last to recover.

Hopes for any significant business recovery in summer 2021 seem increasingly unlikely, despite the success of the UK vaccine programme, as new variants extend travel restrictions. The sector relies on an international market. We cannot replace our customers with domestic ones.

Until the pandemic struck, the UK was a dominant player in the global ELT industry, attracting almost twice as many international students as any of our anglophone competitors.

We welcomed 550,000 students each year, the majority teenagers and children, with around half coming from Europe.

UK ELT adds £1.4bn and 35,000 jobs to the UK economy, underpins our £20bn international education sector, and builds positive relations between the UK and other nations.**

VisitBritain says 614,000 UK visitors in 2018 took an English language course – 1.5% of all arrivals.* They spent more (£1,532 vs. £658) and stayed longer (19 nights vs. seven nights) than other inbound travellers. Before the pandemic, ELT centres were thriving, profitable business and can be so again with the right support.

Our students are driven by a need to learn English, to advance their education and careers, as well as a desire to experience all the UK has to offer.

Demand to study English in the UK remains high and we expect our students to return as travel restrictions ease and confidence rises.

To capitalise on that, our world-class ELT centres need targeted government support to survive until students return, and an operating environment where they can thrive. Once Covid-19 is under control, this great industry will be as viable and vibrant as it was in 2019.

This document outlines the help English UK – the national association for English language teaching centres – believes is crucial for our sector's survival through 2021 and beyond.

Sadly, government support for the industry has been inadequate.

> “DIT is playing a pivotal role in cross-government work... to give the ELT sector the support it needs... we cannot take on the visa element, which is naturally that of the Home Office; we cannot deal with relief for business rates or whatever, because that naturally would be for MHCLG; but I will, as best I can, seek to champion the sector.” **

* Inbound visitors who take an English language course, VisitBritain September 2020
** Minister for Exports Graham Stuart, House of Commons, 1 July 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teaching English usually needs little help from the government but instead supports the UK economy. 550,000 students bring in £1.4bn annually creating 35,000 jobs.*

What's more, English language teaching underpins our £20bn international education sector.**

But the 350 English language teaching centres that are members of English UK lost almost 80% of 2020's business to Covid-19.

A significant minority of English UK member centres, 27%, do not expect to see any recovery at all in 2021. While just over a third expect less than 20% of pre-Covid-19 volumes. Just under 30% predicted regaining 40% of their pre-Covid-19 business this year. Looking ahead to 2022, just under three-quarters thought the market would reach 60-80% of pre-Covid levels. †

Covid-19 is not the only issue: there is widespread concern about the end of free movement and ID card travel (from October 2021) for EU, EEA and Swiss nationals, our biggest source market.

To survive and succeed, UK ELT needs action and support in three areas: targeted business support, tailored visas and immigration with clarity on the resumption of inbound travel, and marketing of UK ELT on a national scale.

We also need a clear plan for how international travel to and from the UK will resume, and when.

* Capital Economics/Bonard research conducted with English UK member centres, January 2018
** Graham Stuart, House of Commons, 1 July 2020
† English UK Covid-19 impact report, English UK/Bonard, March 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONT.

TARGETED SUPPORT FOR ELT CENTRES

- Provide ongoing support for ELT, including extended furlough for staff until spring 2022 if necessary. ELT is dependent on seasonal student tourism. The sector faces a standstill until spring 2022 if there is no meaningful recovery this summer.
- Extend the business rates holiday and associated grants, already offered to the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors, to specifically include the ELT sector. We estimate this would cost no more than £15m.

TAILORED VISAS, IMMIGRATION AND TRAVEL

- Retain ID-card travel for under-18 EU/ EEA/ Swiss group travel after 1 October 2021.
- Continue to recognise the List of Travellers scheme.
- Enable students already studying in the UK on any visa to apply for a new visa for further study (e.g. in higher education) without leaving the country.
- Require all UK English language providers to be accredited and extend educational oversight to Accreditation UK so that it is valid for all visa routes.
- Create a youth mobility scheme, helping ELT to recruit staff for seasonal peaks.
- Restore work rights of up to 20 hours a week for adult students on ELT courses with accredited providers on the government's register of sponsors, in line with major English language competitor nations.
- Clarify when and how international travel will resume, with reassurance on safety for travellers and the public and due consideration for the needs of sectors relying on short-term inbound tourism.

MARKETING ON A NATIONAL SCALE

- Drive and measure success by setting a national growth target for ELT students in the UK within the framework of the International Education Strategy.*
- Support a targeted campaign to communicate the UK ELT offer and rebuild the international market.
- Make GREAT funding available in key source markets for UK ELT.
- Increase financial support available for education exporters.
- Offer innovation and enterprise grants to UK ELT.
- Negotiate bilateral agreements to allow English teachers and students on certain vocational courses to train in the UK, replacing £7m of lost Erasmus+ revenue.

* International Education Strategy: 2021 update, Department for Education/Department for International Trade, February 2021

ABOUT UK ELT

INCOME, REVENUE AND JOBS

Before Covid-19, English language teaching brought 550,000 students and £1.4bn to the UK, supporting over 35,000 jobs.* ELT was more valuable than the fishing industry.

ELT centres are usually major contributors to their local economies and to 'levelling up': hiring a mixture of specialist and general staff; creating business for local transport, tourism, retail and food companies and extra income for families who host students.

Many ELT centres are based in coastal towns where they are a major employer as well as a source of income for local businesses.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE UK'S INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION OFFER

Students who come to the UK to learn English, often as young teens, are likely to aspire to study at one of our world-class universities. 80% tell us they plan to return.**

"English language teaching plays a key role in underpinning the UK's wider education system by helping unlock the door for thousands of overseas students to courses at British universities and further education establishments. ELT is not only valuable in itself, but is a pipeline to the wider educational offer."†

UK ELT's role as the foundation of our international education offer is increasingly played out beyond our shores. UK ELT centres support the export aims of the government in the International Education Strategy through the delivery of world-class English language training via blended and transnational education platforms. ‡

" I have witnessed the truly world-class excellence of UK English language teaching. It is a superb British success story, which enriches the economic and cultural life of the country.

It helps to bring young people from across the globe to our shores. It strengthens our ties with nations worldwide, as international students share their experiences of the UK with their friends and families, building our profile in some of the world's fastest growing global markets.

It fosters business, opportunity and prosperity in all regions and nations of the UK and helps to level up our country. " †

£1.4 billion

added to UK economy each year

35k+ UK jobs

supported by English language students

* Capital Economics/Bonard research conducted with English UK member centres, January 2018
** Bonard research for English UK, December 2017
† Graham Stuart, House of Commons, 1 July 2020
‡ International Education Strategy: 2021 update, Department for Education/Department for International Trade, February 2021

ABOUT UK ELT CONT.

WHAT ARE ELT CENTRES?

Most UK ELT centres are private businesses, often family-run, sometimes commercial chains. A significant minority are in state further education colleges or universities.

ELT centres are all over the UK. The largest concentrations of privately-owned centres are in Bournemouth, Brighton, Oxford, Cambridge and London, where they are a significant contributor to the local economy. Other hotspots include the South Coast, the South West, Kent, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

In 2019, a quarter of student weeks were taught in London, but Northern England increased its share by 9% and Central England by 21%.*

During the summer there is a growth in the number of teaching centres, often in rural and coastal locations targeted by the government's levelling up agenda.

Who are the ELT students?

Students who choose to travel to learn English do so for more than just language learning. They travel for an immersive experience, learning about the traditions, history and culture of the UK.

Just over half (54%) of all students are aged under 18.* Many come to the UK for short language holidays in January, Easter and most frequently in summer. Most under-18s learn in privately-run ELT centres, where they stay for an average of 1.8 student weeks (one student week is equivalent to one student studying for 10 or more hours in a week).

Adults come to learn English for their jobs, further academic study and for pleasure.

In 2019, adults in privately-run centres stayed on average for 4.9 student weeks and in the state sector for 10.9 student weeks.

* Student Statistics Report 2020: English language students in the UK in 2019, English UK/Bonard, July 2020

ABOUT UK ELT CONT.

WHAT ARE OUR MARKETS?

In 2019, 57% of all students (and 65% of student weeks) came from the EU. The top five source countries for private sector centres were Italy, Saudi Arabia, Spain, China and France. For state ELT providers it was China, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Romania and Poland.

While 86% of students studying English in the UK come from just 20 countries, English UK collects data on 114 different markets for UK ELT.

This is a much wider spread of markets than any other ELT destination, indicating strength in depth and further potential for growth.

We analyse market potential by considering economic and demographic factors alongside the average English language proficiency of the country. The matrix is simple and the global demand for English language learning is huge.*

WHAT COMPETITION DO WE HAVE?

The UK led the way, but now global ELT displays the characteristics of a maturing market.

The world's oldest English language school, the London School of English, opened in 1912 and many more followed in the mid 20th century: ELC Eastbourne in 1936, St Giles and Studio Cambridge in the 1950s, with more rapid growth from the late 1960s into the 21st century.

The UK attracts around twice as many students as its nearest competitor, the USA, but shares second place with Australia in the overall time students spend studying.

"Approximately 1.38m students travelled abroad to learn English in one of the eight major ELT destinations (the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand and South Africa) in 2018. "Country-to-country comparisons show destinations are growing at each other's expense." **

WHERE ARE OUR OPPORTUNITIES?

Nearly 60% of students studying English in the UK come from the EU and the UK has the biggest share of the market in Western Europe.

Proximity and, until 2021, freedom of movement made the UK the most popular destination for European English language student travellers.

Growth in the global ELT market is coming from further afield: Asia and Latin America.

There is opportunity for the UK to grow its market share in these regions at the expense of our anglophone ELT competitor destinations. For example, our estimated share of the English language student travel market in China is 15%, 11% for Japan, 13% for Thailand, 7% for Brazil, 9% in Colombia and 8% in Mexico.*

UK ELT centres are also chasing opportunities in new, 'non-traditional' markets arising from significant disruptors in the global ELT industry. These include teacher training, capacity building in support of national language and skills policies, blended delivery and transnational education.

* Student Statistics Report 2020: English language students in the UK in 2019, English UK/Bonard, July 2020
** Global ELT Overview, English UK/Bonard, 2018

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

ELT centres in the UK closed their doors as part of the effort to keep people safe in the first national lockdown. Over a year later, many are still mothballed or only partially open.

After English UK recommended all member centres halt face-to-face teaching in March 2020, remaining students transferred to online learning or returned home.

Booked students postponed or cancelled courses, with many ELT centres moving quickly to offer online teaching.

Online courses are not perceived as a true substitute for a face-to-face course. Students and their families value the experiential learning aspect of being in the UK and often combine study with cultural, sporting and leisure activities.

There is also huge global competition in online ELT, with significant previous investment by some organisations based overseas.

Online provision, originally just for already-enrolled students, has expanded to a limited extent but is not a replacement revenue stream for most UK ELT centres.

In surveys held in February 2021, English UK member centres estimate: *

80% reduction in student weeks

in 2020 compared to 2019.

£590 million revenue loss

in 2020 as a direct result of Covid-19.

91% out of work or reduced hours

staff have been furloughed, released or had their hours or pay reduced as a direct result of Covid-19.

0-40% recovery this year

two thirds anticipate 20-40% recovery in 2021, while one third anticipates none at all.

60-80% recovery next year

72% anticipate 60-80% recovery in 2022.

* English UK Covid-19 impact report, English UK/Bonard, March 2021

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 CONT.

UK ELT CENTRES HAVE DISAPPEARED

13% of English UK member centres have disappeared as a result of closures or mergers, and we fear up to 30% could go under before recovery comes, without targeted government support.

It is a testament to the resilience of the sector that more centres have not closed.

They have joined our fight for business rates relief and other retail, leisure and hospitality support grants and cannot understand why we are not specifically included.

MANY ELT CENTRES ARE UNCERTAIN WHEN AND WHETHER THEY WILL BE ABLE TO REOPEN THIS SUMMER

With inbound travel subject to restrictions, bans and quarantines, it is hard to make firm business predictions.

THE UK'S BIGGEST ELT MARKET FACES THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES

Junior students account for more than 50% of those studying English in the UK* but most come on summer courses of two weeks or less, and simply will not travel while quarantine restrictions are in force.

WE NEED CLARITY ON WHEN AND HOW INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL WILL RESUME

Students and their families need reassurance that travelling to the UK is safe, and when and how restrictions will be lifted or imposed.

We call on the government to put in place a framework that builds on the travel corridors policy to create a risk-based, tiered structure of location-specific travel restrictions, with pre-departure and post arrival tests likely for medium-risk countries.

Decisions on adding or removing countries and regions to travel corridors must be based on clear and transparent data.

* Student Statistics Report 2020: English language students in the UK in 2019, English UK/Bonard, July 2020

WHAT WE NEED FROM GOVERNMENT

Our asks of government will help UK ELT to weather this storm, kickstart recovery and retain our position as the number one global destination for students to learn English.

As a sector that straddles both education and tourism, we endorse and support the position papers published by our partners VisitBritain, UKCISA and the Tourism Alliance.*

We ask the UK government to help kickstart UK English language teaching with:

1. TARGETED BUSINESS SUPPORT
2. A SUPPORTIVE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM
3. MARKETING ON A NATIONAL SCALE

* Proposal for government: Helping the tourism industry recover from Covid-19, VisitBritain, May 2020; Delivering a world- class international student experience: how government can create the conditions for success. A UKCISA policy position, July 2020

1. TARGETED BUSINESS SUPPORT

PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT FOR ELT, INCLUDING AN EXTENDED FURLOUGH SCHEME FOR STAFF UNTIL MARCH 2022

UK ELT has already missed out on a year of business and, without a significant recovery in summer 2021, will have little or no income until spring 2022.

The seasonal nature of ELT means many centres have had little or no income since the summer of 2019, and student travel this summer is in doubt because of uncertainty over the roll-out of vaccination programmes globally; the emergence of new variants of Covid-19; and the need for self-organised or official quarantine after arriving in the UK, making short courses unviable. It is also unknown how quickly confidence will return once travel is possible.

Our members are more pessimistic about prospects for 2021 than they were last summer, when 75% anticipated 40-60% market recovery in 2021.*

Now 27% do not expect any recovery in 2021 While just over a third expect to see less than 20% of pre-Covid-19 volumes.

Just under 30% predicted regaining 40% of their pre-Covid-19 business this year. Looking ahead to 2022, just under three-quarters thought the market would reach 60-80% of pre-Covid-19 levels.**

Centres will need the extension of existing measures and additional support to keep going until they can reopen fully in 2022.

EXTEND BUSINESS RATES HOLIDAY AND ASSOCIATED GRANTS TO ELT

This support already includes the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors. We estimate it would cost no more than £15m to include ELT.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Chancellor announced that all retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England would benefit from a business rates holiday for 12 months. But unclear guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government has led to many English language centres being deemed ineligible by local authorities. Just 17 local authorities have granted the relief.

This issue is an example of where ELT falls between the cracks of the education and tourism sectors.

ELT is clearly part of the tourism industry – all our students travel to the UK to experience our culture and learn our language, with most courses lasting two to four weeks and including a programme of cultural, leisure and sports-based activities. Our centres have few students and no income, and unlike most of the inbound tourism industry, cannot pivot to the domestic market.

This relief is particularly important to ELT centres that tend to occupy large high street premises because they are more accessible for students and where plenty of space is needed for classrooms and common areas.

Without business rates relief, English UK estimates that at least 30% of ELT centres will close for good, along with the jobs they support and the other benefits they bring to the UK.

* The impact of Covid-19 on the English language teaching sector in the UK, English UK/ Bonard, July 2020
** English UK Covid-19 impact report, English UK/Bonard, March 2021

2. A SUPPORTIVE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

It is crucial that the Home Secretary supports UK ELT's needs in post-freedom of movement immigration regulations. Plans to remove ID-card travel and not provide a seasonal worker route for ELT are particularly damaging.

KEEP ID-CARD TRAVEL FOR UNDER-18 EU/ EEA/ SWISS GROUP TRAVEL

Under-18s are UK ELT's biggest market and most come from Europe, travelling on their ID cards as part of organised groups accompanied by responsible adult teachers or guardians.

Feedback from study travel agents and English UK member centres about the ending of ID-card travel at the end of September 2021 has been bleak, suggesting most European parents would not go to the trouble and expense of obtaining passports for what are often only two or three-week study holidays.

The government's suggestion of using the 1961 Council of Europe's group passport scheme is only possible in a limited number of signatory nations.

We fear many groups and individuals will instead choose to study in our competitors Ireland or Malta, within the EU travel area. If only one student in a larger group does not have a passport, the whole group may alter their plans and travel elsewhere.

The economic impact of Covid-19 across our key markets makes it even less likely that parents will prioritise obtaining passports for their children.

A survey of English UK members in 2019 found almost 90% of respondents had some proportion of under-18s travelling on ID only.

Just over three-quarters had under-14s coming on cards, compared to almost 100% of 17- and 18-year-olds. Roughly two thirds of those responding had more than half of their European juniors travelling with ID cards.*

> “ If students cannot travel using their ID cards, our groups have told us that they will not come to the UK. They will go to Ireland or Malta. This school will not be financially viable without those groups and after 53 years will be forced to close. ” *

* English UK survey respondent from a language centre chain

WHAT WE NEED FROM GOVERNMENT

2. SUPPORTIVE IMMIGRATION CONT.

CONTINUE TO RECOGNISE THE LIST OF TRAVELLERS SCHEME

The List of Travellers scheme allows school children who are non-EEA nationals but resident in an EU country to travel to the UK with their school group without needing a visa. However, this scheme is due to end on 1 October 2021.

If one or more children within an EU school group are unable to travel without first obtaining and paying for a visa, the group may prefer to travel to another EU country such as Ireland and Malta.

Some non-EU nationals may not even possess a passport and so will not have the option of obtaining a UK visa.

ENABLE STUDENTS ALREADY STUDYING IN THE UK TO APPLY FOR A NEW VISA FOR FURTHER STUDY WITHOUT LEAVING THE COUNTRY

Other competitor nations allow students to apply for a visa covering several stages of study without the need to reapply.

This concession was granted on a temporary basis to students in the UK during the first national lockdown until 31 July 2020.

Making this concession permanent, and allowing students already in the UK to apply for a new visa without returning home, for instance for university, would make the UK a more attractive destination.

2. SUPPORTIVE IMMIGRATION CONT.

REQUIRE ALL ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROVIDERS TO BE ACCREDITED AND RECOGNISE ACCREDITATION UK ON ALL VISA ROUTES

The UK has led the way on raising ELT standards, and that is done through rigorous accreditation.

All UK ELT centres should be accredited and Accreditation UK should become an educational oversight provider, being accepted on the sponsored visa route as well as short-term study and visitor routes.

We think this is the right thing to do because it is the only UK inspection framework focusing on ELT and raising standards within the industry. It has a global reputation as the world's oldest ELT inspection and accreditation provider.

RESTORE WORK RIGHTS OF UP TO 20 HOURS A WEEK FOR ADULT STUDENTS ON ELT COURSES WITH ACCREDITED PROVIDERS

This would bring the UK in line with the major English language competitor nations. Since student migration routes were tightened up, there have been few or no instances of people failing to return home or breaking the terms of their study in the UK.

The UK faces a significant disadvantage compared to its competitors as only students at universities are now allowed to work.

We seek the restoration of work rights for ELT students across the spectrum of providers: it makes study in the UK more attractive as students can practise their language skills in the workplace and gain valuable experience and life skills for when they return home.

SUPPORT ELT CENTRES TO RECRUIT THE QUALIFIED SEASONAL STAFF THEY NEED

ELT is a seasonal industry that needs large numbers of qualified staff for short summer peaks. Schools have previously recruited qualified EU staff to complement their UK-based staff.

Once the recovery is under-way, an uncapped youth mobility scheme for EU, EEA and Swiss national will help teaching centres to recruit the qualified staff they need.

3. MARKETING ON A NATIONAL SCALE

UK ELT needs support to restore market confidence and make the most of opportunities for growth.

We need clear, consistent and positive messaging led by government.

DRIVE AND MEASURE SUCCESS BY SETTING A NATIONAL GROWTH TARGET FOR ELT STUDENTS IN THE UK

The 2021 update of the 2019 International Education Strategy does not include a growth target for the number of international ELT students studying in the UK.

There is only a growth target for the UK HE sector. This should be joined by ambitious targets for all parts of the UK's international education ecosystem, including ELT.*

SUPPORT FOR A TARGETED CAMPAIGN TO COMMUNICATE THE UK ELT OFFER

While we support an increase in funding for Study UK, this campaign only focuses on potential higher education students.

Following the collapse in ELT student numbers due to Covid-19, what is needed now is a campaign to restore the international market for UK ELT, supported by all national stakeholders and targeting priority audiences for recovery and growth.

MAKE GREAT FUNDING AVAILABLE IN KEY SOURCE MARKETS FOR UK ELT

This will support promotional campaigns targeting partners, buyers, students and their influencers, including increased support for Ministerial and Champion-led trade missions to key markets where specific barriers to trade have been identified.

INCREASE AVAILABLE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION EXPORTERS

This should include TAP (Tradeshow Access Programme) and similar funding programmes, and the loosening of eligibility criteria. This will help cash-strapped ELT organisations with no marketing budget to attend key events and visit overseas partners, ensuring the continuing visibility of 'brand UK' in the recovery phase.

OFFER INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE GRANTS TO UK ELT

Alongside targeted advice and consultancy, this will help UK ELT centres to pursue emerging opportunities and new markets in support of the aims of the government's International Education Strategy.*

HELP US REPLACE VALUABLE ERASMUS+ RELATIONSHIPS

We call on the government to commit resources to the negotiation of global bilateral deals enabling participants to travel to the UK for vocational, educational and training programmes that will replace revenue lost as a result of leaving Erasmus+. For UK ELT, this is estimated to be at least £7m per annum.

* International Education Strategy: 2021 update, Department for Education/Department for International Trade, February 2021

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