

# Minutes of the 96th (extraordinary) Meeting of the English UK Board of Trustees (MB96a)



**Date:** Wednesday 18 September 2024, 13:00 - 14:30

**Venue:** Online meeting

**Present:** Shoko Doherty [chair], Mary Doody (MD), Spencer Fordham (SF), Francesca Giacomini (FG), James Herbertson (JH), Farhan Quraishi (FQ), Mark Rendell (MR), Victoria Paterson (VP) Stephan Roussounis (SR), Justin Quinn (JQ)

**Attending:** Jodie Gray (JG), Huan Japes (HJ), Annie Wright (AW), Nuria Felip Puignou (NFP) and Susan Young (SY) [minutes]

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## Constitutional business

### 1. Apologies for absence

None received

### 2. Declarations of interest in any item of business on the agenda

None. JG explains SY will minute once back from sick leave.

## Matters for discussion

### 3. Maximising opportunities for growth

JH said he would like to see a standing item on the Board agenda about growth and the UK maintaining its position. The UK was lagging behind many competitor countries as the figures shown at the AGM had showed. It was essential that the Board be aware of opportunities, for instance increased numbers on the Japanese and Korean YMS or taking advantage of Canadian and Australian numbers contracting. He proposed the English UK team should share its relevant activities at each board meeting and that other opportunities be strategically discussed. The sector needed more student weeks, to grow and to adapt.

JG thought this a good agenda item: she had recently done presentations and a podcast on the current situation and while people were delaying travel decisions there were also pockets of opportunity opening up. There was growth in self-funded students in some Gulf countries, which was a good topic to discuss. A lot of English UK's work was with agent associations, ranging from webinars presenting the latest statistics – it was useful that English UK was known as the owner of the best data. English UK also worked with agent associations on their

own events in countries such as Spain, Italy and Argentina. She mentioned working with BELTA and the DBT on some promotional work in Brazil, and the work of the ELT Action Group (ELTAG) offered more inter-government opportunities and impact.

SD said at the recent GAELA meeting the UK had positive things to share for perhaps the first time in many years while others had more challenging perspectives.

Points made in a wide-ranging discussion included:

- As well as the formal work described by JG it was good for travelling board members to be aware of these issues and fly the flag for English UK and UK ELT. Business English UK members often visited the chamber of commerce or embassy when overseas.
- It was important to champion the UK as a brand and capitalise on this.
- Where was the “next Saudi Arabia” for sponsored students? A strategic plan should include lobbying specific governments. SD said English UK was trying to host informal agent networking events, ideally with sponsorship. JG said all activity related to government lobbying went through the International Education Strategy, owned by the government. This was set for review later in the week and it looked like Sir Steve Smith had been reappointed as the international education champion. Though focused on HE, he was open to listening, was coming to StudyWorld Manchester and was keen to do more for ELT so English UK should take more advantage of that. He had “hundreds” of meetings with overseas education ministers. JG said we should feed into the IES review and see where it went.
- As the Ents board dealt with these issues perhaps their minutes should be added to the standing item? JG said they were always available to the board but perhaps a little more time might be allocated to discuss.
- Did statistics show any change to local hubs? What effect had the new YMS numbers had? SD asked if YMS statistics could be the subject of a Freedom of Information request: HJ said this was possible but a supplementary survey would be needed to find out whether YMS visitors were using ELT centres. JG said Bonard had no data about local hubs, but Dubai was emerging and while English Philippines had come to GAELA and talked about growth they had just a thousand students.
- A point was made about focusing on scholarship opportunities before they reached agents: could a working group be set up to be part of conversations about this type of opportunity before the details were formalised? English UK could join British representatives in-country to represent Brand UK. JG said this was a good point – in the past English UK had infiltrated the embassy network with some success. Embassy Magazine’s education conference had been a good way to do this and attending as an exhibitor would enable English UK to make more of it. There was also the opportunity to bring more high-level contacts to StudyWorld this year as it dovetailed with the BETT

show which was attended by education ministers and commercial officers. They represented important growth opportunities but were not used to sitting in meetings like agents and English UK members did not always understand the value they represented.

- HJ suggested adding this to the agenda of an APPG for International Students meeting as a new growth opportunity.
- Government ministers changed fast in Gulf regions, and it was important to invest in making Brand UK the first or second choice for sponsored students, not just individual members. There should be a working group showing proactivity with governments and aiming to be first in their minds.
- This was a massively important region for the UK with ease of access for students which should be leveraged more – perhaps the boutique fairs, which built the brand and supported agents with government support could be brought back? The UK was back in fashion: ease of access and costs of travelling to the UK had improved and the value of sterling to the euro was stable. The market was ripe for the taking and a strategy was needed.

SD thought a working group to explore these opportunities would be good and this should be discussed at the November meeting.

JG suggested presenting a plan to the board in November for a growth strategy in the Middle East. This was agreed.

#### Action point/s

- a. Working group to explore these opportunities should be discussed at the November board meeting
- b. Executive team to present a growth strategy plan for the Middle East at the same meeting.

#### 4. Appointment of vice chair

The two candidates were invited to give an elevator pitch.

- NH had business skills enabling the team to maximise its own skills. Mentioning three strengths, he began with a passion for inclusivity, having worked in England and Wales and both the state and the private sector and experience of inclusivity work which fit the mission statement about collective energy. His second point was about getting things done: it mattered what each person did outside board meetings. He would dedicate himself to expanding this work, which spoke to mission statement about transforming lives through learning and intercultural understanding. Finally, he mentioned his strategic experience – having worked in private language schools and the state sector he understood those sectors, and with roles in sales and marketing, academic management, teacher training and homestay officer he was a useful all-rounder. He was increasingly interested

in sustainability. Summing up, he mentioned inclusion, action and strategic experience.

- JH had been inspired by what SD wanted to achieve as chair. He understood this was a demanding role and was considering what he could contribute as a board member. He wanted to be as active as he was as chair of English UK London which had been a very hands-on role, bringing more schools in, inviting agents to every meeting and seizing opportunities for information sharing about markets and opportunities. He had come into the industry as a language student and had also been an agent and an accommodation provider. He wanted to focus on the growth agenda, removing barriers and raising the profile of the sector. Finally, he raised the issue of whether the vice-chair automatically becoming chair was the fairest way to do it and suggested a discussion about this.

The candidates left but before the vote there was a conversation about the final issue raised by JH. JG said in the past there had sometimes been two vice-chairs and in the old rules there was a vague statement that the VC could but did not have to become the next chair. Changing the rules was within the rights and responsibility of the board as long as there was agreement - SD concurred, saying a change to the chair's term of office had been made in the last board meeting.

A new board member commented that it was unfair to be asked to make the decision about what should happen in four years' time after one meeting. JG said this was a good point – these were newly-drafted rules and weaknesses were being uncovered.

She agreed with the suggestion of discussing the issue properly at the November board meeting.

JH was voted vice chair.

**Action point/s:**

- c. Rules around election of chair and vice chair to be reviewed in the November board meeting.

## **5. Concerns/ issues arising from the summer season**

It was agreed that this had been covered in the earlier discussion about growth.

## **6. Implications of the legislation applying VAT to private school fees**

JG said this was related to the government's new legislation on applying VAT to private school fees. There had been a pre-election assurance from Keir

Starmer's office that ELT would not be directly implicated in this, but it did affect the industry in a number of ways.

The legislation was in draft form so subject to change and likely to be implemented from January 2025. There were key questions including what this meant for ELT programmes run by private schools and what it meant for ELT centres hiring private school facilities for programmes.

The documentation was nuanced and loosely worded so expert advice had been sought from Buzzacott and Mike Payne. Their opinions had differed on every question so English UK had put them in touch with each other and they had settled on an agreement on the legislation as it was currently drafted, with the caveat that this might change and/or be affected by individual circumstances.

- Would private school members of English UK providing summer ELT programmes have to charge VAT? Most likely not.
- Would it make a difference if a different company was set up for that? Most likely not.
- If a private school hired space or services to a summer school, did it have to charge VAT on this? The answer hinged on whether both bodies were eligible for education VAT exemption. Private schools would continue to be eligible bodies with an exception for their fees, so the status quo remained.

JG said that was where we had landed - with a massive caveat of uncertainty - and the proposal was to share the advice document created with members with this caveat clearly highlighted. Members partnering with boarding schools could use this during negotiations with bursars, but clarity would not come until the legislation had been passed, implemented and HMRC began to look at VAT returns.

HJ added that the assumption had been that Labour would simply remove eligible body status from private schools, but this did not appear to be what was happening. It was good for ELT if private schools retained eligible body status as they were not necessarily required to charge VAT when selling accommodation or services. It was looking positive at present, but things might change.

Asked if the association had responded to the consultation, HJ said the questions were so limited that it had been decided not to. A lot of work had previously been done on this and the association did not want to alert the government that the draft guidance was potentially generous to ELT.

Comments included:

- No organisation which previously hadn't charged VAT had raised the suggestion that it would start doing so.

- One boarding school used by a board member had received advice which chimed with English UK's so price rises should be resisted – they would need the income even more now. SD had negotiated a raised price down.

SD thanked JG and HG for getting advice in difficult circumstances. JG said it would be sent to members the next day.

## 7. **Research on the economic impact of UK ELT**

HJ said before 2015 English UK had no robust data about the industry's worth before the first economic impact report provided by Capital Economics in 2015 and refreshed in 2018 with support from Bonard. English UK was still quoting those figures post-Brexit and post-pandemic and it was time to rerun the exercise a decade on. The ELT Action Group was very keen for this to be progressed.

The main economic forecasting bodies had been approached and Pragmatix Advisory was one of the cheaper ones, had worked with trade bodies and CEO Mark Pragnell had led on our Capital Economics work. Theirs was a strong proposal which didn't just look at headline figures but included regional impacts and case studies. The scope would be extended to accredited non-members and those accredited by other bodies. Talking about the value of ELT to different communities would make a difference to our lobbying power and the report might focus on the Thanet area, including host families, transport companies and other businesses.

HJ thought it would be a really good report and would cost about £40k: English UK wanted about half of this to be funded by sponsors and there had been some interest from exam boards so far, with scope to approach six or seven other organisations if necessary. The report would be launched at the parliamentary reception on 14 May 2025.

Responding to a remark about the usefulness of such data to devolved nations, HJ said this might be hard to break down across national borders. The crucial thing was that the figures were robust and would demonstrate why the industry was important in different areas, across the UK and how it underpins a £25bn industry.

One member observed that with the suggested sponsorship, this report would cost just £50 per school. He was a huge supporter of the plan but thought 40 pages might be too long.

Everyone agreed the report should go ahead. JG said that once funding was secured work would begin this year, with funding in next year's budget. She added that a lobbying document would be created from the report which would be more like 20-25 pages.

## **Other business**

### **8. AOB**

The BETA youth and student travel summit was raised as a valuable event for schools to attend.

### **9. Date of next (full) meeting**

Tuesday 12 November 2024, in person in Manchester

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