

Minutes of the Education Sector Action Group Thursday 23 April 2026

Held at the Department for Business and Trade, Old Admiralty Building, London.

Attendees

- Baroness Jacqui Smith – Minister for Skills, Department for Education (DfE) (Chair) *(in-room)*
- Chris Bryant – Minister, Department for Business and Trade (DBT) *(in-room)*
- Baroness Jenny Chapman – Minister, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) *(in-room)*
- Professor Sir Steve Smith – UK International Education Champion *(in-room)*
- Professor Rachel Sandison – Trade and Investment Envoy for International Education, Scotland *(virtual)*
- Professor Rachel Langford – Chair, Global Wales *(virtual)*
- Gerard McCann – Representative for NI universities network *(virtual)*
- Jodie Gray – Chief Executive, English UK *(virtual)*
- Julie Robinson – CEO, Independent Schools Council *(in-room)*
- Neil Leitch – CEO, Early Years Alliance *(in-room)*
- Julia Garvey – Deputy Director General, British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) *(in-room)*
- Annamarie Hassall – CEO, NASEN *(virtual)*
- Jamie Arrowsmith – Director, Universities UK International *(in-room)*
- Jane Rexworthy – Chair, UK Skills Partnership [UKSP] *(in-room)*
- Maddalaine Ansell – Director Education, British Council *(in-room)*
- Simon Nathan – Deputy Chief Executive & Head of Policy, ISC *(virtual)*

Welcome, Ministerial introductions and opening remarks

The meeting formally marked the transition from strategy development to delivery of the UK's International Education Strategy (IES). The Minister for Skills (DfE) opened by emphasising that ESAG's central role is now to:

- Drive implementation of the Strategy through Sector Action Plans (SAP)
- Provide sector-led insight on opportunities and barriers
- Support Ministers in identifying where government intervention is required to enable growth

The meeting also reinforced the importance of cross-government delivery, with DfE, DBT and FCDO working jointly, alongside sector stakeholders.

The IES sets three core ambitions across five focused countries:

- Enhancing the UK's global standing and influence through education
- Sustaining and diversifying international student recruitment
- Growing total education exports to £40bn by 2030

IES focused countries are India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.

There was strong consensus that delivering these ambitions requires a more systematic, coordinated, and action-oriented approach, moving beyond high-level strategy into concrete delivery mechanisms.

Minister Smith confirmed that Professor Sir Steve Smith has agreed to continue as the UK's International Education Champion for a further term until October 2027, highlighting his instrumental and energetic role in building relationships and removing barriers to international partnerships.

Minister Bryant reiterated DBT's commitment to the strategy and highlighted the importance of international education for UK standing and economic viability, noting the positive impact of alumni networks. He mentioned the role of British educational technology in global markets and the need for cross-sector connectivity.

International Education Champion, Devolved Governments and Education Sector Introductions

International Education Champion – Professor Sir Steve Smith

Sir Steve highlighted the DBT International Education Team's refocus on IES priorities, stressing the need for stronger sector leadership in delivery. He underscored that FCDO involvement is "mission critical" and that cross-government collaboration is highly valued in international markets.

He drew on international engagement, noting strong demand from partner countries such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, and emphasised the UK's reputation as a trusted partner. He described his role in building ministerial relationships globally, supported by extensive engagement.

Sir Steve reinforced that the strategy extends beyond higher education to English language, skills, professional qualifications and SEND, all of which have growing global demand. While acknowledging challenges in student recruitment and the geopolitical context, he remained optimistic about growth, particularly in transnational education (TNE) and wider sector contributions to the £40bn target.

He emphasised that ESAG should act as a practical delivery mechanism, focused on prioritised action, clear ownership and sustained coordination. Sector Action Plans should identify where industry leadership can drive progress and where government support is needed to remove barriers and strengthen the UK offer.

Sir Steve reaffirmed his commitment to working in partnership across government and with Devolved Governments, positioning education as a key UK asset for soft power and international relations.

Devolved Governments

Rachel Sandison (Scottish Government):

Rachel welcomed the IES delivery and celebrated Erasmus+ reassociation, noting Scotland's commitment to maximising participation across sectors. Rachel informed members of the ongoing collaboration with Scottish Government offices in Brussels and engagement with youth, schools, and sports organisations.

Rachel Langford (Global Wales Board, Wales):

Rachel introduced Global Wales and its role in promoting Welsh international collaboration across tertiary education. She echoed excitement for Erasmus+, emphasising the need to make it successful and learning from Wales's mobility schemes.

Gerard McCann (Northern Ireland):

Gerard represented Northern Ireland's university network, expressed delight at Erasmus+ reassociation, and described efforts to support internationalisation through partnerships.

ESAG Core Members

Jane Rexworthy (UK Skills Partnership):

Jane presented the "Advancing Talent with UK Education" international offer document, emphasising its role in unifying the UK's education offer and supporting government-to-government partnerships. She highlighted the importance of a whole-system approach, including early years, schools, skills, and colleges, and the need for collaborative action plans. Jane stressed the role of UK Skills Partnership in linking thematical areas and supporting sector engagement, especially post-COVID.

Julia Garvey (British Education Suppliers Association - BESA):

Julia described opportunities in the growth of British international schools, especially in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and the importance of collaboration to support UK EdTech companies. Julia raised concerns about DBT support limitations for UK companies in Brazil and other regions and offered BESA's network to help fill gaps.

Neil Leitch (Early Years Alliance):

Neil highlighted the shift in mindset towards Early Years as foundational for education and social/emotional development. He noted international interest in early years and challenges around safeguarding and perceptions of quality in the UK sector.

Jodie Gray (English UK):

Jodie explained English UK's role in representing English language teaching centres, the sector's economic value, and its soft power impact. She described challenges from COVID, market disruptors, and the Middle East conflict affecting student numbers, especially from the Gulf. She included insight into identified opportunities in Latin America and Europe, especially with Erasmus+ and the Youth Experience Scheme.

Julie Robinson (Independent Schools Council):

Julie outlined ISC's representation of UK independent schools and overseas franchises, supporting all three IES ambitions. She noted challenges in declining international pupil numbers and the sector's role in the education export pipeline.

Annamarie Hassall (NASEN):

Annamarie focused on inclusive strategies and international consultancy. She highlighted the challenge of publishing international research in English and the need for language skills to share best practices, especially from Latin America and stressed the importance of respectful collaboration with other sectors.

Jamie Arrowsmith (Universities UK International):

Jamie described UUKi's representation of 142 universities, emphasising the importance of global engagement and transnational education. He noted the growth in TNE, especially in India and Indonesia, but cautioned that TNE's export value is lower than onshore recruitment, which is facing a challenging landscape. Jamie welcomed Erasmus+ reassociation and its reputational impact.

Maddalaine Ansell (British Council):

Maddalaine confirmed British Council's commitment to increasing the UK's international standing through education, with maintained or increased resources in key countries. She outlined work across higher education, technical/vocational education, schools, English language, and non-formal education, and offered support for sector action plans. Maddalaine announced recruitment for Erasmus+ Sector Lead roles and asked all to encourage applications.

SECTOR ACTION PLANS**Baroness Chapman (FCDO Minister):**

The minister reflected on the importance of partnership and cross-government collaboration, particularly in skills and education for sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. She acknowledged the complexity of moving into the delivery phase, highlighting key themes including data challenges, the need for coordination across sectors, and system interdependencies.

The minister emphasised that these challenges are expected and manageable, underlining the importance of openness and collaboration in addressing them. She reaffirmed strong ministerial commitment to delivery and stressed the opportunity to achieve significant global impact. She highlighted the need for joined-up ministerial engagement and handed over to Oscar for sector action plan guidance.

Oscar Tapp-Scotting (DfE):

Oscar provided guidance on developing sector action plans, including baselines, milestones, priority markets, enablers/barriers, delivery partners, measurements, and partnerships, with a 100-day deadline for completion [1 August 2026].

Sector Action Plans are likely to include:

- Baseline assessment of the sector
- Priority markets
- Key opportunities and barriers
- Delivery partners and stakeholders
- Metrics and milestones
- Priority partnerships and initiatives

He encouraged collaborative, sector-led approaches and acknowledged the complexity of data and mapping export earnings.

ESAG members' initial reflections on developing the Sector Action Plans

Sir Steve highlighted a critical gap in current Sector Action Plan thinking, noting that not all export-generating parts of the education sector are being captured. He specifically pointed to education suppliers, including major publishers, as well as professional bodies and qualifications providers. He stressed the need for a comprehensive mapping of export earnings to ensure all contributors are explicitly reflected in sector plans.

He added that pathway providers and independent higher education institutions are also at risk of being overlooked. His central message was that without full system coverage, the UK risks undercounting exports and undermining progress towards the £40bn ambition.

Rachel Langford highlighted the complexity introduced by devolution, noting that data systems, delivery partners, and structures differ across the nations. She underscored the need for Sector Action Plans to be flexible and adaptable to these differing contexts.

Jamie Arrowsmith proposed a more granular structure for the Higher Education Sector Action Plan, suggesting separate strands covering international student recruitment, transnational education (TNE), and outward mobility.

Jodie Gray raised challenges around cross-sector overlap, particularly within the English Language Teaching (ELT) sector, which intersects with qualifications providers, publishers, and the wider education ecosystem. She noted that these blurred boundaries create difficulties in defining scope.

Julie Robinson supported the need for a comprehensive mapping approach across the system, suggesting a more structured method to identify all contributing organisations and their role in exports. She outlined that the Independent Schools Council's Sector Action Plan is likely to include overseas pupils in UK schools, British international schools overseas, and franchise schools. She also raised the importance of data ownership and coordination.

Members agreed common opportunities across sectors including:

- Transnational education growth, especially through partnerships aligned to national strategies
- Expansion of international schools and curriculum exports
- Strengthening English language provision as an entry point into broader education engagement
- Increasing demand for:
 - Skills and technical training
 - Digital and AI-enabled education solutions
 - Inclusive education models

There was strong emphasis on pipeline effects, where one part of the system (e.g. ELT or schools) feeds into wider export growth.

Several cross-cutting challenges were noted:

- Declining or uncertain international student recruitment trends
- External geopolitical risks affecting mobility
- Operational constraints, including:
 - Reduced in-market support capacity
 - Barriers to entering or scaling in new markets
- Fragmentation across the sector, particularly:
 - Smaller providers lacking international capability
 - Gaps in engagement from FE and skills providers
- Additional concerns included reputational risks in specific sub-sectors and the impact of domestic policy decisions on international attractiveness.

There was strong consensus that:

- Official export data is time-lagged and insufficient for real-time decision-making
- Sector-level data varies significantly in quality and availability
- There is no single, unified picture of total education exports across all sub-sectors

Minister Chapman reflected on the discussion, acknowledging the complexity of moving into the delivery phase. She highlighted key cross-cutting themes including data challenges, coordination across sectors, and system interdependencies.

She emphasised that these challenges are expected and manageable, stressing the importance of openness and collaboration. She reaffirmed strong ministerial commitment to delivery and the opportunity to achieve significant global impact.

Any other business and closing remarks

Ministers emphasised that:

- The UK has a strong global reputation and clear competitive advantages
- Education is a critical pillar of both economic growth and international influence
- There is a need to act quickly to maintain and extend this position

There was strong confidence that, through ESAG and the Sector Action Plans, the UK can deliver sustained growth and deeper global partnerships.

Minister Smith closed the meeting by framing the discussion as a clear shift from strategy to delivery. She reinforced the importance of cross-government working and the value of sector leadership and engagement.

Date of the next ESAG meeting

Thursday 17 September 2026