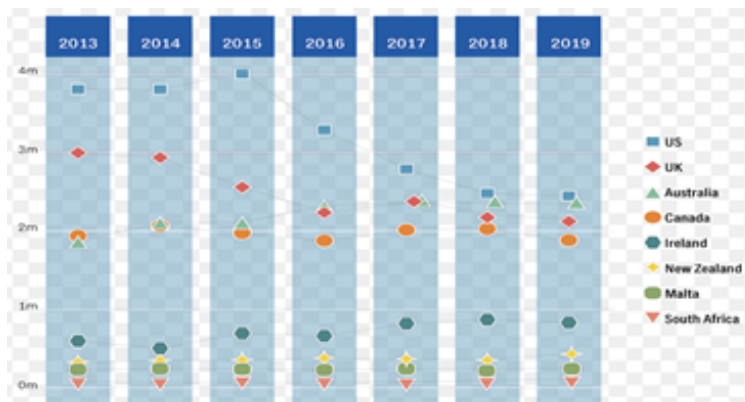


If you've worked in international education for a long time, you've probably heard this before: English Language Programs (ELPs) are the canary in the coal mine for the international education field. Like other axioms, this statement is established, accepted, and self-evidently true. ELPs are the first to feel the negative effects of a global crisis or downward market trend and, unfortunately for ELPs, there are a lot examples to support the claim: the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s, September 11, 2001, the bird-flu pandemic of the mid-2000s, the global recession in 2009, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. These events caused declines in U.S. international student enrollment, but they hit ELPs faster and harder. We are the canary in the coal mine. Look to ELPs to get a sense of the overall health of international education in the U.S. Look to ELPs to determine potential impacts of a global event on international student enrollments.

While this oft repeated phrase is true, it is not helpful to ELPs. It perpetuates the idea that ELPs are somewhat separate from the larger international education whole, while also painting them as fragile. It turns ELPs into the canary in a cage instead of being seen as one of the facets of the international education field. The imagery does not reflect the resiliency, strength, and importance of ELPs and the role they have in helping the U.S. remain a top study destination.

ELPs serve as an access point into the U.S. higher education system, while also offering short-term opportunities to learn English for personal or professional development. ELPs create innovative English language offerings that support U.S. higher education institutions, businesses, local communities, and international partnerships. ELPs contribute to their local economies, enhance the diversity and vibrancy of their communities, and perhaps more than any other part of the international education field, they foster intercultural understanding. This is what people should think of when considering ELPs, not the canary in the coal mine. We have a role in strengthening, supporting, and promoting U.S. international education efforts and are certainly more than a bellwether for the field.

One of EnglishUSA's goals, as the only organization in the United States that includes all types of ELPs, including pathway programs within institutions, is to increase the visibility of English language study in the United States. Despite all the positive ways ELPs support U.S. international education and benefit local communities, promoting and advocating for the ELP-field on the national level has several obstacles. A primary one is that, unlike some other English language training (ELT) destinations (Canada, Ireland, and Australia, for example), the United States does not have some kind of national strategy for international education. According to Bonard, a leading provider of global international education data and research, other ELT markets are gaining market share while the U.S. has seen its share of the global ELT market decrease.



(Source: Bonard, Which ELT destinations are gaining (or losing) market share?, presented at the EnglishUSA Stakeholders Conference on October 13th, 2022.)

While the U.S. is the top destination for English language training, other ELT markets are catching up. This is due, in part, to the fact that their governments have a strategy for attracting international students. Some of them include incentives for English study in their country, like facilitating work/study opportunities or providing agent incentives and bursary payments for long-term English language courses. If the U.S. is to remain the top study destination for the ELT market and, indeed, the global international education market, it should develop a national strategy for international education.

To that end, EnglishUSA joins NAFSA, the Association of International Educators, in recommending a coordinated national approach to international education that set targets, support policies, and fund programs to increase the number and diversity of international students at U.S. higher education institutions, including ELPs. EnglishUSA, NAFSA, and many other international education associations recommend establishing a White House coordinating council to provide leadership on international

education across federal agencies to create more welcoming visa and immigration policies to help restore the United States' attractiveness as a destination for international students and scholars. This council would develop a national strategy on international education and include collaboration from the Departments of State, Homeland Security, Education and Commerce along with diverse international education associations, like EnglishUSA, that support institutions and programs that welcome students. Through NAFSA's website, you can Take Action by sending a message to the Biden administration and urge the White House to adopt a national strategy for international education. You can tailor your message to emphasize the role of ELPs and advocate for their inclusion in a coordinated national approach to international education.

A U.S. national strategy for international education would benefit the country, but it is certainly not a given that the government will move in that direction. Until it does, ELPs and other higher education institutions must work within the current systems and regulations for international students, some of which can serve as barriers. This can be especially true for ELPs and their students. To address some of these concerns, on October 12th, 2022, EnglishUSA released a list of ELP-specific recommendations to the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Commerce. The recommendations include:

- ensuring that consular officials do not, off hand, deny the F-1 visa because a student is admitted to an ELP;

- providing data on F-1 student overstay rates to either prove or dispel the perception that ELP students are more likely to overstay than other categories of F-1 student;
- permitting limited opportunities for F-1 students, including ELP students, to gain off-campus employment without having to go through the current I-765 Application for Employment Authorization process;
- and providing financial resources for all states to be represented by a Study State Consortia since not all states currently have one.

These recommendations would support ELPs and overall U.S. international education efforts while also helping the U.S. remain competitive in the global ELT market. We urge you to discuss these recommendations with your congress people.

EnglishUSA is also actively working to resolve one the field's long term issues: the lack ELP student data. The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) releases an annual SEVIS by the Numbers Report. The report uses Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) data and provides the total number of SEVIS records for active F-1 and M-1 students in a calendar year. It highlights notable trends and identifies the number of F-1 students in every education level as defined in SEVIS, except for Language Training students (i.e. students enrolled in ELPs). This omission is noted in EnglishUSA's ELP-specific recommendations and we are advocating for ELP F-1 student data to be included in the report.

We encourage you to speak with your ELP's SEVP Field Representative and ask them to include ELP student data in SEVIS by the Numbers as they do with the other education levels. Including Language Training student data will ensure that all education levels, including English language study, are represented in the report and allow a better understanding of this category of student. More importantly, not including ELP student data in the report underlines the false perception that ELPs are not part of the larger international education picture. Not all F-1 students who come to the U.S. are here to earn a degree. Most of those students are enrolled in ELPs and they should be counted and included in any annual report that looks at F-1 data and overall trends in U.S. student enrollments.

One could argue that the lack of in-depth, ELP student data has hindered the field and contributed to perceptions that it is somewhat separate from the U.S. international education field, like with the canary in the coal mine axiom. However, EnglishUSA is taking steps that will generate the most detailed ELP-specific data that has ever been collected in the U.S. The association was awarded a U.S. Department of Commerce Market Development Cooperator Program (MDCP) grant, which will be used, in part, to generate industry data. There is no nationwide enrollment data collected by the IEP industry itself. There is consensus that more data is necessary to assess enrollment trends, predict future enrollments, develop new markets, anticipate demand for new program offerings, and compare the U.S. share of the world IEP market.

Through the MDCP, EnglishUSA will partner with Bonard, the globally recognized market research and strategy development firm, to collect detailed information on ELP enrollments – information that is routinely collected in the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Those nations' data sets include quarterly enrollment figures categorized by age group, individual students or cohort, student source, course type, and visa type. Such cross-tabulations of student enrollment data will allow U.S. ELPs and policy makers to analyze enrollment trends and focus marketing and recruitment strategies on national, regional, and local levels. Such detailed data sets for U.S. ELPs will support industry-wide marketing, recruiting, and, importantly, advocacy efforts.

We at EnglishUSA appreciate your support and encourage you to continue to advocate for your students and programs. Please share your thoughts and questions about any of the above topics on EnglishUSA's Engage Forum.

*Daryl Bish is the Assistant Director and PDSO at the University of Florida English Language Institute. He has extensive experience as a teacher, program recruiter, and administrator, having worked for university and community college programs. His master's degree is in Curriculum and Instruction, with TESL Certification. He has served as the NAFSA IEP Network Leader, a CEA site reviewer, and is currently Chair of the Advocacy and External Relations Committee on the EnglishUSA Executive Board.*