

General Meeting - Monday 16th March, 1 pm

Barry Johnson, UCU Regional Official will be present.

Privatisation at Keele.....

Plans are at an advanced stage to invite a private company, Study Group International, onto the Keele campus to teach some English language, Foundation Year and first-year Principal courses from September 2009.

Rumours have circulated since last autumn that the University was in discussions with private education providers. At the Joint Negotiating Committee on 11th November 2008, UCU officers asked senior managers if there was any truth in them and were told by the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sue Scott, that there had been some exploratory thinking but that it was not currently under consideration. However, rumours persisted, and it was reported to the University Learning and Teaching Committee in February and Senate in March that a deal with Study Group International was close to agreement. The plans had been developed without any consultation with the English Language Unit or open discussion in the academic schools affected.

What is Study Group International?

Study Group International (SGI) is a private education company owned by a group of private equity funds (CHAMP Private Equity and Petersen Investments). It is one of a number of similar companies, such as INTO and Kaplan, that are trying to get a foothold in UK higher education. (SGI's founder is the present chairman of INTO.) These schemes have been extremely controversial and problematic at other universities.

Essex University withdrew from a proposed joint venture with INTO following a referendum of staff in which 90% said they believed the partnership would damage the university.

At Goldsmiths College 94% of staff and students voted against a planned joint venture with INTO. The College decided against a joint venture but is still considering some form of partnership with INTO.

In a poll at Queen's University Belfast 95% of staff said that a proposed joint venture would damage the reputation of the university.

Last week it was announced that the School of Oriental and African Studies had rejected privatisation options in the face of strong opposition from staff.

These companies work by recruiting students with low English language and subject qualifications, and offering them an International Foundation Year on university campuses leading into university degree programmes. Their competitive edge comes from employing staff on lower pay and with lower required qualifications than is normal in HE. They do not provide salary scales, career progression routes, union recognition, or pension schemes equivalent to USS.

They market themselves aggressively to students, making exaggerated claims about their academic status and emphasising 'guaranteed' or 'assured' progression into university courses. INTO had to withdraw a job advert in which it claimed to be 'university-led', after a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority.

Study Group International has a web-site for each of its nine International Study Centres based at UK universities (see http://www.studygroup.com/uni_partners/isc_uk_partners.aspx).

The web-sites are designed to give the appearance that the Centre is an integral part of the university; it requires extremely careful reading to reveal that the Centre is run by a private company and that the students are taught by employees of the private company, not university academics. SGI claims to be accredited by the national accreditation scheme run by the British Council and English UK (<http://www.studygroup.com/company/accreditations.aspx>), but in fact this is only true for the Embassy CES centres owned by SGI, not for other parts of its business such as the International Study Centres based in universities.

SGI's standard package is a three-term foundation course leading to first-year university entry. The course provides tuition in English language, study skills and several academic subjects. Its normal English language entry requirement is an IELTS score of 5.0 but it will accept students with scores as low as 3.0 with two terms' extra tuition. SGI operates an academic year of four 11-week terms, so it is highly ambitious, compared

with widely accepted guidelines, to claim to be able to raise a student's English score from 3.0 to the university entry level of 6.0 or 6.5 in a little over a year. SGI does not use internationally recognised exams such as IELTS or TOEFL for progression but uses its own English tests instead. Pre-Masters courses are also offered at some of the Centres.

The web-sites promise students 'Assured progression to your degree' on completion of the course. Someone who reads the web-site carefully, with knowledge of UK higher education practices and nomenclature, will understand that there are actually assessment hurdles, but the message conveyed to foreign students who are less familiar with these niceties is that progression is automatic.

In short, SGI's marketing pitch is to offer fast, assured access into university courses for foreign students whose qualifications, particularly in English, are weak.

The proposal for Keele

We understand that the proposed scheme at Keele will include not just the three-term foundation course as described above but also a four-term (i.e., one-year) course providing direct entry into the second year of Keele's single-honours degree programmes in Business & Management, Computing and International Relations; this, we have been told, will be aimed at overseas students with qualifications equivalent to very high A-level grades.

This raises a number of serious questions.

First, this four-term course is so different from anything SGI has attempted elsewhere, either in the UK or overseas, that one must question SGI's ability and experience in teaching the equivalent of a first-year Principal course, in three very different subjects, in parallel with English language teaching, all in the space of a year. (SGI does feed students into the second year of degrees at Stirling and Herriot-Watt, but the Scottish four-year degree structure is very different from ours, and the subject teaching provided by SGI is elementary.)

Secondly, given SGI's marketing niche, can it attract students at the opposite end of the ability range, as proposed? Why in fact would such a well-qualified student choose a commercial Foundation Year course when they could enter a conventional degree course directly (possibly preceded by some English language preparation if necessary)? SGI claims to be able to recruit 250 students per year. Where will it find such remarkable students in such numbers?

Thirdly, what are the implications for the existing provision in our English Language Unit and International Foundation Year, not to mention our existing first-year Principal teaching in Business & Management, Computing and International Relations? The Senate paper states that 'These developments will not impact upon the current provision delivered by Keele's English Language Unit.' Management has assured us that the English Language Unit will stick to 'in-sessional' teaching, while SGI will stick to 'pre-sessional' teaching. However, this distinction becomes meaningless if the term 'pre-sessional' is redefined to include Level 0 and Level 1 teaching. If two organisations are providing similar services on the same campus it is obvious that in the long

run only one will survive. Language teaching staff at other universities have found their jobs, pay and conditions come under pressure as a result of working alongside SGI Centres with inferior pay and conditions.

Fourthly, what are the academic risks to Keele? The danger most widely expressed elsewhere is that of linguistically and academically weak students being fed into university courses. Keele will lose control of its admissions: i.e., it will lose the right to accept or reject students on an individual basis but will merely oversee the assessment and progression processes; staff elsewhere have complained that this is merely a 'paper exercise' and lacks involvement by anyone with English language expertise. There is also the reputational danger to Keele as students feel that they have been brought here under false pretences.

Fifthly, why not expand our in-house provision instead of letting SGI do our teaching for us? Given Keele's tradition of Foundation Year teaching, this would seem a natural alternative. If SGI's strength is in overseas recruitment, why not hire SGI (or some other agency) to do our recruitment, and do the teaching ourselves? Why contract out our core activity?

None of these concerns is properly acknowledged in the Senate paper, which shows a very naive attitude to the risks. Companies owned by venture capital and private equity funds are noted for short-termist pursuit of profit and asset-stripping rather than commitment to academic standards and public service. Keele should think very carefully - both for the sake of its staff and students - before entangling its core activities with such a company.

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A members meeting will be taking place on Monday 16th March at 1 pm in CBA0.061 to discuss the Privatisation issue raised. Our Regional Official, Barry Johnson will be available to meet members and take questions.

We're on the web.....
<http://www.keele.ac.uk/socs/ucu/>