



UCU briefing on the proposed outsourcing/franchising of Roehampton programmes to QA

The University of Roehampton is currently in talks with an organisation called QA with a view to outsourcing the university's preparatory academic English programmes and possibly some Business School programmes. This briefing explains why UCU is opposed to a partnership between Roehampton and QA.

Who are QA?

QA Group is a private company which provides IT and management training courses for companies and individuals. It has very limited experience in higher education and English language teaching. Since 2011, QA has run two branch campus business schools in partnership with the University of Ulster. These branch campuses in London and Birmingham offer international foundation and pre-sessional academic English courses as well as a small range of undergraduate and post-graduate Business programmes. In addition, QA formed an agreement with Northumbria University in 2013 to run a London branch campus as well as taking over delivery of the content modules on the International Foundation programme at Northumbria.

Why does UCU oppose the partnership between Roehampton and QA?

Evidence suggests that QA may not be able to fulfil its promise to recruit large numbers of high quality international students. In addition, the way it operates represents a threat to both academic quality and reputation. This is why:

- According to a report in the THES on 24th June 2014, Home Office concerns about visa fraud have led the QAA to launch an investigation into quality and

standards at the London branch campuses of a number of universities, including the University of Northumbria and University of Ulster's London campuses, which are run in partnership with QA¹. The government continues to crack down on questionable student recruitment practices, with 3 universities and 22 private colleges having had their tier 4 highly trusted sponsor status suspended since 24th June 2014². In a statement to the House of Commons, the immigration minister said: "Other universities are involved in the continuing investigation and further action may follow, although because of the steps they have already taken to improve their processes including voluntarily ceasing overseas recruitment to London sub-campus, we will not at this stage remove their right to sponsor foreign students."³

- The minutes from the University of Ulster's Council meeting on 21st June 2013⁴ indicate the following serious concerns regarding QA's business schools (QABS):
 - The QAA had begun an investigation into the Birmingham campus as a result of a submission to its Concerns scheme.
 - A compliance audit carried out by the university's international department on 6th June 2013 revealed 'outstanding issues [...] in respect of the appropriateness of academic entry qualifications and English language competence'. As a result the university suspended QABS English language testing.
 - The minutes of 4th October 2013⁵ noted that the QAA matter was now closed and that the University had been informed by the home office that it would keep its highly trusted status, but it was noted that addressing the issues had involved a considerable drain on senior management time and that the partnership 'still needed significant attention at Senior Management level.'

- QA is promising that it will bring hundreds of international students to Roehampton. However, the University of Ulster Council minutes from October 2013 also indicate a concern with student numbers. They state that numbers for 2012/13 were significantly below the target.⁶

- With regard specifically to English language provision, reports from the British Council⁷, which inspects and accredits English language centres, indicate that in February 2014 there were 24 full time and 14 part-time international students enrolled on academic English programmes at the London QABS,

¹ THES: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/qaa-launches-inquiry-into-london-branch-campuses/2014148.article>

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/364163/Factsheet-v3_4_-_15-10-14.pdf

³ THES op. cit.

⁴ http://www.ulster.ac.uk/secretary/secretariat/minutes/council_1213_june_.pdf

⁵ http://www.ulster.ac.uk/secretary/secretariat/minutes/council_1314_oct.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/education/accreditation/centres>

while in Birmingham there were 20 part-time students. Absenteeism was identified as an issue of concern at both centres. It was noted that one of the programmes running at the time of inspection was to be closed due to difficulty in students obtaining visas. The predominant nationalities of students were listed as Nigerian, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Egyptian, Colombian and Senegalese. Of these, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Ghana have been openly identified by Home Office officials as high risk immigration countries 'due to relatively high levels of abuse among visa applicants', according to a report in the Independent on 23rd June 2013⁸.

- The above-mentioned British Council reports on QABS also make interesting reading when compared with reports on universities' non-privatised academic English programmes. While both QABS centres met the minimum requirements of the scheme, the only strengths that the British Council inspectors noted for the London QABS were enrolment procedures and premises/facilities⁹. For Birmingham, only premises/facilities are identified as a strength¹⁰. The accreditation scheme is primarily aimed at private language schools. However, it happens that both the University of Ulster and Northumbria University, previous to the change to QA, also participated in the scheme. The British Council report on the University of Ulster's own in-house provision lists course design, learning resources, academic staff profile and care of students as strengths¹¹. Northumbria University's pre-privatisation report of 2012 indicates strengths in student administration, quality assurance, premises and facilities, learning resources, course design, learner management, teaching, care of students and leisure opportunities¹².
- For both QABS centres, the main recommendation of the British Council report was *accreditation for an initial period of one year with a substantial spot check in the first year to determine whether accreditation should be extended beyond this period*. The standard recommendation following a successful first inspection is *accreditation with a spot check in the first 12-18 months*¹³. Thus, it seems the British Council inspectors had some doubts about the quality of English Language provision at QABS.
- Little information is available on QA's partnership with Northumbria as the agreement was only finalised towards the end of last academic year. However, according to UCU at Northumbria, QA recruited just one student for Northumbria's London 'campus', while the foundation and pre-masters courses at Northumbria have no more students than the university itself was

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/india-pakistan-nigeria-the-high-risk-countries-whose-visitors-to-uk-face-paying-3000-security-bond-to-make-sure-they-return-home-8670217.html>

⁹ http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/qabs_london_full_2014_post_review.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/qabs_birmingham_full_2014_post_review.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/university-of-ulster-full-2013.pdf>

¹² http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/northumbria_university_2012.pdf

¹³ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/education/accreditation/information-students-agents/accreditation-inspections>. See e.g.

http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/eynsford_college_full_2014_.pdf and

http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/girne_american_university_full_2014.pdf.

able to recruit in previous years. The two main differences, according to Northumbria staff who are now teaching the students recruited by QA, are that firstly, these students have noticeably lower levels of English than previous cohorts, despite ostensibly having arrived with the same IELTS scores, and secondly, their attendance and general attitude is much poorer.

- At the moment, responsibility for the International Foundation course and pre-session course remains with Northumbria's English Language Unit staff. QA is responsible only for the subject area pathway element of the foundation course. Therefore, there is no evidence that QA is able to deliver a full foundation programme to a satisfactory standard.
- QA's Higher Education is led by Julie Noone, formerly Chief Operating Officer at Kaplan. Kaplan is an American for-profit company which, in 2012, was described by a US Senate committee on private providers in higher education as exhibiting "some of the most serious problems of any company examined by the committee"¹⁴. For specific problems associated with Kaplan UK, please see the section below on private providers.

It is clear from the above that a partnership with QA is likely to bring risks to Roehampton without providing significant benefits. The organisation appears to be unable to recruit large numbers of international students to its current preparatory academic English programmes. In addition, whilst undergraduate and post-graduate students may be attracted to the idea of studying in London rather than Belfast in order to gain a degree from the University of Ulster, Roehampton is already a London-based university, so it is unclear what the advantages would be of outsourcing or franchising Roehampton's Academic English and Business programmes to QA.

Problems with Private Providers in UK Higher Education

Evidence from the experience of other universities which have formed joint ventures or partnerships with private providers, such as INTO, Kaplan and Study Group International, indicates that such projects carry a number of risks and problems.

- Financial Risk
 - The University of East Anglia pulled out of its London campus joint venture with INTO in January 2014 after the campus lost £7 million over 3 years¹⁵.

¹⁴ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/hefces-kaplan-appointment-risks-barbarians-at-the-gate/2011446.article>

¹⁵ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/anglo-indian-ties-have-been-butchered-by-may/2010735.article>

- City University has lost between £0.4 and £1 million per year over three years in its joint venture with INTO as a result of INTO failure to meet recruitment targets^{16 17}.
- Quality and Reputation
 - In August 2013, the THES¹⁸ reported that the University of Exeter planned to cut international Business student numbers following concerns raised at the university's Council meeting about the quality of students recruited by INTO, its joint venture partner.
 - Heriot-Watt University recently ended its agreement for Study Group to run its international foundation programme because "their intake was so low grade and so few useful students came through [to degree programmes]"¹⁹.
 - A UCU briefing on Kaplan²⁰ highlights the fact that like other private providers, this organisation has lower standards for teaching staff qualifications than universities do. Whereas universities usually require a recognised diploma in English language teaching, an MA in Applied Linguistics or similar, and experience in teaching in English for Academic Purposes, Kaplan only requires a BA and a certificate in English language teaching (obtained after a four-week intensive course). A diploma, MA and substantial experience are preferable but not listed as essential.
 - The same UCU briefing lists concerns which have been raised by Kaplan staff about teaching and learning issues, including:
 - That students' level of English on entry was not adequately checked.
 - That unsuitable teaching materials were provided.
 - That class sizes were too large.
 - That few students were required to re-sit assessments despite variable results.

¹⁶ https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/168711/Council_-_Minutes_approved_Open_23_11_12.pdf

¹⁷ http://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/204738/City-University-London-Financial-Statements-2012-13.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/exeter-to-cut-international-business-student-numbers-after-quality-concerns/2006664.article>

¹⁹ Email from UCU at Heriot Watt to UCU at Roehampton

²⁰ http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/k/a/ucu-cme-Kaplan-briefing_jul10.pdf

- That some students were being allowed to progress to a degree programme despite not having achieved an adequate level of English.

It should be noted that Kaplan, INTO and Study Group are large international organisations with some background in higher education and/or English language teaching. If these organisations cannot meet expectations in terms of student numbers, profitability and academic standards, what evidence is there to suggest that a relatively small, UK-based, IT training organisation such as QA will be able to do better?

Roehampton's English Language Unit

The University of Roehampton already has an English Language Unit (ELU) which runs foundation, premasters and preessional preparatory English programmes and insessional academic English courses for international students. It is staffed by highly qualified and experienced lecturers who have a strong commitment to quality and standards in teaching and assessment. The ELU's provision was praised by the QAA in its last institutional review of Roehampton as an example of good practice²¹.

The current ELU provision caters not only for Business students but also prepares and supports students for the full range of RU degree courses, with the number of students from Dance, Education and Science without Borders equalling or exceeding the number of Business students on some programmes.

A review of Roehampton's English language provision was scheduled for 2014 but was postponed after UCU objected to the appointment of the managing director of another private provider as an external member of the review panel, on the basis of a clear conflict of interests. The review has still not taken place and so the evidence amassed on the quality of provision and its financial viability has yet to have been considered by management.

Privatisation is not inevitable

Universities are facing unprecedented challenges in the current political and economic climate. We have a choice in how we respond to these challenges. Private providers such as QA hold out an unsubstantiated promise of short term-financial gains. This needs to be balanced against longer term risks to quality and reputation, without which the university cannot thrive. Universities which have considered and rejected privatisation of their English language provision on these grounds include:

²¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Documents/University%20of%20Roehampton/Roehampton-University-IRENI-13.pdf>

- **De Montfort University**, where a poll found 90% of staff to be against privatisation, and the VC declared that the potential risks outweighed the potential benefits²².
- **University of Essex**, where 90% of the 500 staff who responded to a poll opposed the privatisation of the English Language centre, and a joint venture with INTO was eventually rejected by Council.
- **University of York**, where concerns about the threat to reputation, as well as the likely impact on academic staff workloads of large numbers of under-prepared international students entering degree programmes in certain departments, led to a decision to reject a joint venture with INTO²³.
- **Goldsmith's College**, where a poll revealed that 94% of staff were against privatisation.

Questions that need to be asked about the Roehampton-QA deal

- What exactly are the terms of the proposed agreement between Roehampton and QA? For example, what time period does the agreement cover? What are the financial benefits to both parties?
- Which courses will be outsourced to QA immediately and which courses is the University considering outsourcing to QA in the future?
- What due diligence procedures has the university carried out?
- What impact and risk assessments have been carried out and what are the findings?
- What justification is there for franchising the university's programmes to an outside provider when they could be taught in-house and all income retained by the university?
- What evidence is there that QA can recruit more international students than the university currently does?
- Since the University did not carry out the planned review of the English Language Unit, what evidence does it have that Roehampton's English language provision is in any way unsatisfactory or that it could not be expanded by the University itself?
- How will QA recruit students? Which agencies will QA use? What experience do these agencies have in recruiting students for universities in the UK? Why

²² <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5830>

²³ Email from UCU at York to UCU at Roehampton.

is it not possible for Roehampton to establish relationships with such agencies directly instead of going through QA?

- What safeguards are in place to ensure that students with inadequate levels of English are not accepted onto QA foundation programmes and do not progress to Roehampton degree programmes? What internal and external mechanisms will be in place to oversee assessment procedures, for example?
- How will QA's programmes at Roehampton be branded? Students who select a foundation or pre-masters programme at a university expect to be taught by lecturers employed by the university. A clear indication that this is not the case will make the programmes less attractive to prospective students, but branding them as University of Roehampton programmes will lead to dissatisfaction when students eventually realise that they have been misinformed.
- How will QA, which is a training organisation specialising in IT and business skills, cater to the wide range of students that Roehampton attracts, including Dance, Education, Human Rights, English Language and Linguistics, English Literature and Creative Writing, and Health Sciences?
- What terms and conditions will QA staff be employed under?
- If QA does not recruit the hundreds of students that it is promising, how many academic jobs at Roehampton are at risk?