

PRESS RELEASE

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Newcastle University set itself on a collision course with staff and students when it announced yesterday its intention to privatise the University's Language Centre despite strong protests from students and the academic trade union, the University and Colleges Union (UCU).

The Newcastle University Language Centre provides high-quality tuition in English for Academic Purposes, and is considered one of the best in the country. The tuition is vital to most of the 2,500 overseas students who study at the University every year.

Newcastle University UCU Communications Officer, Dr Richard Hull, said

"This plan is madness but it is not too late to stop. It will damage the integrity and reputation of Newcastle University, and is bound to mean a reduction in the quality of education provided to overseas students".

"Despite repeated requests from UCU for information, alternative proposals and proper risk assessment the University seems stuck on this very dangerous course of action".

Earlier this month over 50 staff and students gathered to voice their concerns outside a closed meeting of University Council, the official governing body, but to no avail. A recent poll of current Language Centre students showed overwhelming rejection of the plans. Many said they would not have come to the Language Centre if it had been privately owned because it would not have the same reputation abroad. The University Students' Union has also expressed considerable alarm at the planned privatisation.

Staff and students at the Language Centre say that privatisation would mean replacing existing expert staff with lower-paid less experienced teachers, and may increase class sizes, reduce entry qualifications, or increase tuition fees.

The plan is to form Joint Venture companies with INTO University Partnerships, a company controlled by property tycoon Andrew J. Colin, and includes a massive new city-centre accommodation block for 500 overseas students. Newcastle UCU says that INTO has no track record in teaching English for Academic Purposes, but its directors do have considerable interests in speculative property development. UCU are especially concerned that so many details of the plans have been kept secret, and say this does not bode well for the future management of the Joint Ventures. They are also concerned that the University may find itself liable for heavy costs should there be financial problems. Dr Hull commented, *"I do not believe that members of the University Council have properly considered their duties and liabilities as trustees of a large public organisation."*

Information for Editors

Andrew J Colin recently sold Study Group International to the Daily Mail Group. SGI, started in Brighton, taught English as a Foreign Language to European youngsters. One of his many associated companies, Challenge Holidays and Travel, provides "adventure and educational holidays" in the US and elsewhere for UK and Hungarian youngsters. It also arranges au pair services for US families. INTO only this year entered the market for English for Academic Purposes when it persuaded one other university, the University of East Anglia, to take over their virtually non-existent Language Centre and build new accommodation. The East Anglia venture is already advertising for new staff with lower qualifications than is the norm for teaching English for Academic Purposes, and earning up to 30% less.

The INTO marketing information tells potential students that there will be "*Guaranteed entry to your chosen degree at a UK university*", which is clearly misleading.

Searches of Companies House records have so far revealed over 50 companies associated with the directors of INTO. Most of these are relatively new property development firms with extensive and complex cross-ownership ties.

At one stage the University planned to transfer both staff and services from the Language Centre to a single Joint Venture company, 50% owned by INTO. However, they have allegedly recently decided to establish another Joint Venture with only 49% INTO ownership which would be the employer for the Language Centre staff. It is likely that this compromise has been forced on INTO by the Universities superannuation Scheme (USS) in order to ensure that existing Language Centre staff who are members of USS can continue their membership.

The plans allegedly mean that the original Joint Venture company, 50% owned by INTO, would lease the new accommodation block from its owners for something like 90 years before ownership of the block transferred to the University. INTO or its associated property development companies would build the block and then sell it on to a property ownership company, who would then lease it to the Joint Venture. The leasing agreement will be guaranteed by Newcastle University, so that if the Joint Venture fails the University will be liable for all the continuing costs of the lease.

The massive 500 bed accommodation block in the centre of Newcastle will also house a large number of much younger overseas school students studying English at lower levels.

Staff at Northumbria University went on strike earlier this year to fight proposals to privatise their English Language Centre.

CONTACTS for further details:

Dr Richard Hull, Newcastle University UCU Communications Officer -
office 0191 222 8652

Dr Jennifer Toomey, Newcastle UCU Secretary - office 0191 222 8264