



Review of UK transnational education in Greece: University of Sheffield and City College

November 2015

Executive summary

City College in Thessaloniki is also known as the International Faculty of the University of Sheffield. It delivers 10 bachelor's and 15 master's programmes in business, management and economics, computer science, psychology, and English language and linguistics. Academic staff from the College are also members of the supervisory teams provided by Sheffield University for doctoral students registered across the Balkan region. All of its programmes lead to awards made by the University of Sheffield and the College collaborates only with the University of Sheffield. In November 2015 more than 1,200 students were registered at the College, of whom 40 per cent came from the Balkan countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

A distinctive part of the College's strategy is to become a leading provider of UK higher education in South Eastern Europe, a growing market of over 200 million people, and it is pursuing this goal by developing partnerships with other higher education institutions in the region. As part of this review, the QAA team visited the main site in Thessaloniki but also studied documentation and interviewed staff involved in building these further collaborations, including a recently agreed partnership with a newly constituted college in Athens: Athens Tech.

The relationship between the University of Sheffield and City College has been established and developed over 20 years. Since 2009 the College has operated as a sixth faculty of the University, the International Faculty, containing and managing its own academic departments. Unusually, this means that the University of Sheffield does not collaborate with City College as it does with other partnerships, but treats the sixth faculty as an integral part of the University, and applies its standard procedures for the academic operation of the faculties. This arrangement allows for the same autonomy as other faculties of the University, subject to the usual oversight by Senate and its subcommittees. The International Faculty is using this autonomy to initiate and develop higher education provision and to build partnerships with other institutions in South Eastern Europe using the University of Sheffield approvals framework. This is a transnational education (TNE) model provided by a UK university that is distinctive in its scale, mode of operation and ambitions.

Introduction

1 The University of Sheffield is one of the UK's largest civic universities and plays leading local, national and international roles in learning and teaching, research, public engagement, and knowledge transfer. It was rated 69th in the world in the 2014 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings and in the top 10 per cent of all UK universities by the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. The University received its Royal Charter in 1905, and is a founding member of the Russell Group. It is also a member of the White Rose University Partnership (with the Universities of Leeds and York) and of the N8 Group of research universities in the North of England. The University provides programmes leading to its degree awards through five faculties located in Sheffield, and a sixth International Faculty (IF) in Thessaloniki in Greece.

2 The University's approach to provision and partnerships in other countries is informed by its International Strategy, which emphasises the development of an international academic community and curriculum, the promotion of the University's visibility, and the use of its research and knowledge transfer activities to achieve global benefits. This strategy has led to the development of a relatively small number of primary Sheffield Partnerships designed to reach the agreed outcomes, and which are fostered through long-term, managed relationships. Secondary partnerships are also occasionally supported to meet specific departmental objectives.

3 As part of the strategy, the University has developed its International Faculty out of a core collaboration, constructed over the last 22 years, with City College in Thessaloniki, Greece. City College, which is, in terms of academic activities, the same organisation as the International Faculty, is a private college of higher education founded in 1989 by G.E. Strategakis Ltd. It is located in the centre of Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, where it occupies two buildings, the Leontos Sofou building and the Strategakis building. The College has a licence to operate from the Greek Ministry of Education, and makes an annual return to the government listing its students and their registration with the University of Sheffield.

4 The College has adopted a vision that focuses particularly on responding to the demand for higher education from the more than 200 million people living in the countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe, sometimes referred to as the Balkans. Current provision from City College consists of full and part-time bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration, finance and economics, computer science, psychology, and English language and linguistics. The College also provides a doctoral programme, supervising students in Greece and more widely across the Balkan region through the South-East European Research Centre (SEERC).

5 At the time of the QAA team's visit in November 2015, City College had 1,220 registered students, of whom 44 per cent were undergraduates and 56 per cent were on taught postgraduate programmes. A distinctive feature of City College is that only 40 per cent of the student body is from Greece, the remaining 60 per cent drawn mainly from other Balkan countries, and many of the international students do not speak Greek as their first language. The College has 145 staff, of whom 105 are academic staff.

Set-up and operation

Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

6 City College was founded in 1989 as a private college of higher education. It remains an autonomous institution with financial and legal independence, but since 2009 its academic and teaching functions have been integrated into the University of Sheffield as one of its faculties. This may be a unique model of international collaboration in UK higher education.

7 The partnership with City College to provide programmes leading to University of Sheffield awards is not typical of the University's collaborative arrangements. Indeed, the provision by City College is not defined by the University as collaborative provision, but as provision by the sixth faculty of the University, the IF, which operates largely through the standard regulations and policies that apply to the five other faculties based in Sheffield. The provision is in this sense internal core provision by the University, except that the learning and teaching takes place in Greece.

8 The University's relationship with City College began in 1993 with the validation of programmes delivered by the College. The programmes were revalidated by the University in 1996, 2002 and 2007. The SEERC was established as a joint research centre with the University in 2003. In 2009 the University's Senate designated City College as the IF, and its teaching and research activities were incorporated into the University's academic structures. However, City College continues to be recognised by the Greek government as a private further education college responsible for its own financial autonomy and governance.

9 Until 2009, programmes delivered at City College in Thessaloniki were validated by the University, and subject to annual monitoring and periodic re-approval with oversight by the University's Committee for Collaborative Provision and the Quality and Scrutiny Subcommittee of the Learning and Teaching Committee, which in turn reports to Senate. By 2009 eight bachelor's and 14 master's degree programmes had been validated, in business studies, computer science and psychology. In addition, a doctoral programme is supervised jointly by staff from the University and staff from SEERC. Research students are registered directly with the departments based in Sheffield and all standard processes for research students studying at remote locations apply.

10 Since 2009, provision by the College/International Faculty has been required to comply with University regulations and policies governing the programme design, approval and assessment of its own internal programmes. The review team observed that staff of the University and College, as well as the students, use the terms 'City College' and 'International Faculty' or 'IF' almost interchangeably in speech and documents. This report generally uses the acronym IF to describe the institution in its post-2009 form.

11 Until 2014, the provision at City College was delivered by three academic departments: Business Administration and Economics (BAED), Computer Science (CSD) and Psychology (PsD). In addition, the Executive Education Centre (EXED) was responsible for managing the Executive MBA in Thessaloniki and at the other Balkan centres. The College is involved in a number of research collaborations through the SEERC.

12 Using the regulatory framework of the University, an additional department was added in 2014: the new English Studies Department, established as part of IF at Thessaloniki. Three new programmes in English language and linguistics were approved by applying the University of Sheffield's standard programme approval procedures for internal

programmes. The first cohorts of students to BA and MA English language programmes were recruited for the academic year 2014-15.

13 A key objective of the IF is to develop higher educational provision that meets demand across the wider Balkan region. Programmes, mainly master's degrees in business and finance and computer science, are delivered through collaborative partnerships between IF and institutions in Athens, Bucharest and Sofia. IF staff also deliver blended learning master's programmes in Belgrade, Kiev, Skopje and, until 2013, Istanbul. This provision at sites beyond Thessaloniki takes the form of either collaborative partnerships set up by IF (where a proportion of the teaching is conducted by the partner) or distributed learning arrangements (where IF delivers all the teaching and assessment). An example of a collaboration arranged by IF was examined in this review: the development of a partnership between IF and Athens Tech, a newly established private college in Athens.

14 The legal relationship with City College takes the form of a contract between the University of Sheffield, City College and G.E. Strategakis Ltd, a family firm representing the owners of the College. The most recent version of the contract is due to expire on 17 July 2019. The current contract is defined as an 'educational agreement relating to the delivery of programmes leading to the granting of an award by the University of Sheffield'. The agreement governs 'the respective parties' obligations in respect of the delivery by City College of courses leading to University [of Sheffield] Awards in Thessaloniki, and the collaborative arrangements City College has entered into with VUZF Sofia, SNSPA Bucharest, and Athens Tech and future similar collaborations it enters into'.

15 The agreement with the University of Sheffield states that 'City College is designated as an International Faculty of the University in accordance with the University Ordinances and accordingly may...exercise the powers afforded to faculties of the University as prescribed by ordinance XVII (Powers of the Faculties)'. The agreement defines City College, and not the University, as responsible for the employment of teaching staff and for the provision of administrative and learning resources, equipment and facilities necessary for the provision of programmes. The agreement requires that City College 'ensure the legal status of City College and the nature of the relationship between City College and University is made clear to students and prospective students in all communications and shall not expressly or impliedly hold itself out as being the University of Sheffield'.

16 From 2007, IF began to extend its reach by delivering programmes at centres across South East Europe, and by 2009 this provision included the delivery of master's degrees in business and finance in Tirana, Belgrade, Bucharest, Kiev, Sofia, Istanbul and Skopje. In 2014 the University, in the form of IF, set up a partnership with the newly constituted Athens Tech, and approved the collaborative provision of computer science and business degrees launched in autumn 2014.

17 Athens Tech is a joint venture between the Business College of Athens (BCA), an established private business college in Athens, and Athens Information Technology (AIT), a non-profit education and research centre focusing on information technology, telecommunications and innovation management. The University approved the partnership with Athens Tech through its Committee for Collaborative Provision and IF, as a faculty of the University of Sheffield, approved the academic content of two programmes, a BSc in Computer Science and an MSc in Management of Business, Information and Technology, launched in autumn 2014.

18 The collaboration with Athens Tech was approved according to the established University procedures. The proposed partnership was subject to a visit by Sheffield-based staff as part of the approval process, and a second visit was undertaken by representatives of the Committee for Collaborative Provision towards the end of the first year of operation.

The new programmes were scrutinised by the Committee for Collaborative Provision in line with the University's Collaborative Provision Framework and reported to the Quality and Scrutiny Subcommittee. Annual monitoring will be undertaken each year and reported to the Committee for Collaborative Provision. The IF is also responsible for admissions and registration. Initially, at least 70 per cent of the teaching at Athens Tech and 100 per cent of the assessments will be carried out by the IF staff based in Thessaloniki. However, IF indicated to the review team that it was likely that a larger part of the teaching would in time be provided by Athens Tech itself, and that it would become more of a collaborative partnership, subject to approval by the University.

The legal and operational status of the International Faculty

19 The legal and operational arrangements established between the University of Sheffield and City College/International Faculty probably constitute a unique model for UK transnational education (TNE). The IF is defined as an integral part of the University for the delivery of programmes and the making of awards. At the same time the two institutions are legally distinct entities that have reached contractual agreements.

20 As the rest of this report seeks to show, the commitment of the staff of both the University and City College to making IF's educational and research activities those of a single institution, the University, appears to generate positive outcomes; in particular they facilitate the inculcation and operation of UK standards and quality in the context of Greece and the Balkans.

21 However, the creation of the IF also creates some unusual features.

- The staff in Thessaloniki have the status of honorary staff of the University of Sheffield but are not its employees.
- A proportion of the programmes delivered by City College/IF have the same titles as those delivered at Sheffield, but somewhat different content as they were separately approved and developed to meet the needs of students in the region. Nonetheless, the degree certificates awarded are identical and give no indication of the place of study, which might be understood to be in Sheffield. The accompanying transcripts do, however, state the location of study.
- Although it is designated as the sixth faculty of the University, the current agreement with City College explicitly states that the College 'shall not expressly or impliedly hold itself out as being the University of Sheffield'.

22 In short, the University of Sheffield treats City College, its staff and its learning resources as both an integral part of the University and a separate institution. In addition, there was at the time of the QAA visit a contractual agreement for four years between the two institutions. The review team **recommends** that the University continues to work with City College on the longer-term format of its contractual relationship both with City College and its partners throughout the Balkans.

Quality assurance

Academic standards

23 In the management of standards and the quality of the learning experience, IF applies the regulations and mechanisms of the University, including procedures for the approval of new programmes and partners, annual reflection (AR), annual monitoring of its collaborative partners and periodic review. IF was included in the QAA Institutional Review of the University held in December 2012. It is represented on central University committees in the same way as the five Sheffield-based faculties, including the Learning and Teaching

Committee, the Quality and Scrutiny Subcommittee, the Enhancement and Strategy Subcommittee, the Research Committee and the Ethics Committee.

24 In establishing partnerships with other providers, the departments within IF use the same procedures as would any other Department or School within the five faculties based at Sheffield. All proposals for new distributed and collaborative programmes by IF are scrutinised by the Committee for Collaborative Provision. All the IF's arrangements with other organisations are subject to full due diligence and approval through the Quality and Scrutiny Subcommittee, to which the Committee for Collaborative Provision reports. Programmes that are defined as distributed, once partner arrangements have been approved, are regarded as IF programmes and are subject to the normal arrangements for University programmes, as described above. Programmes defined as collaborative are managed by the IF but are also subject to approval and regular monitoring by the University's Committee for Collaborative Provision. All proposals for such programmes are initially supported by Learning and Teaching Services of the University, working with the Chair of the Committee for Collaborative Provision.

25 The review team was able to examine the documentation leading to setting up the new Department of English Studies at Thessaloniki and the approval of the three new programmes it began delivering from September 2015. As these were internal programmes, the two-part procedure required the completion of a programme approval process involving consultation with relevant experts in the University and the development of programme and module descriptions, all of which then required approval from the IF Learning and Teaching Committee. The team developing the proposed degrees at IF visited Sheffield and consulted the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Arts and Humanities, the Head of the School of English, various academic staff within the School of English, and relevant University professional services. In Thessaloniki, plans were developed with the City College Administration Board, the International Faculty Executive Board, and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. The relevant documentation was then approved by the IF Learning and Teaching Committee.

26 All departments in IF undertake an AR meeting. This is a standard University process that runs from November to June, in which the departments at City College begin with a meeting, attended by student representatives, that considers a full range of data and reports, including student attainment, progression, module evaluations, and external examiners' reports. The meetings are supported by a staff member from the University's Learning and Teaching Services (LeTS) in Sheffield, who writes the formal reports that are considered by the Quality, Strategy and Enhancement Committee (QSEC) and Learning and Teaching Committee within IF. The process produces action plans for all the departments. The IF report is combined with those from other faculties for the University report, which is submitted to the Quality and Scrutiny Subcommittee in Sheffield. The AR process is comprehensive and thorough, and provides the key quality management committees in Sheffield with a full account of the performance of the faculty in Greece. It was the view of students and academics at IF that, given the length of the process, the vast majority of matters that arose from it were already dealt with by more immediate communication and responses within City College in Thessaloniki.

27 The University conducts five-yearly periodic reviews of all departments including those in IF. This process uses staff from other faculties and schools in Sheffield, as well as externals drawn from other UK universities and students. It provides an in-depth review of the programmes of study offered by the department and the student experience. External examiners' reports are managed by LeTS as they are for the whole University. The review team was able to review examples of the periodic review processes and outcomes that had been applied in Thessaloniki, and to see a full range of recent external examiners' reports and minutes of examination boards at departmental level.

28 The examination board minutes and the reports of the periodic review panels taken together provide a detailed insight into the complexity of developing and sustaining a UK higher education approach to teaching, learning and assessment, not only in Greece but also at other sites in the Balkans. Periodic review reports have commented on the challenges of maintaining the quality and comparability of provision across multiple locations in the context of varied cultural and educational expectations on the part of students and adjunct staff.

29 A significant proportion of the programmes delivered by IF are also subject to external audit and accreditation by professional bodies, including the British Accreditation Council (BAC) for Further and Higher Education (most recent approval 2012), BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT (most recent approval 2014), the Chartered Management Institute (CMI, most recent recognition 2013), the Association of MBAs (AMBA, most recent approval 2013), and the British Psychological Society (BPS, most recent approval 2015). The University's strategy for seeking external professional accreditation for a range of programmes offered at the College is a **positive feature**.

30 The reports of the visiting teams from these professional bodies are complimentary about the quality of the staff and curricula delivered at City College, and lend weight to the conclusion that there is systematic and diligent attention paid to the application of the University of Sheffield's rules and procedures for the management of standards and quality.

31 City College's status as a faculty of the University of Sheffield requires that it takes responsibility, like any other faculty, for the quality management of its programmes, reporting on its exercise of its powers to the institutional-level committees, particularly the Learning and Teaching Committee, and its subcommittees the Quality and Scrutiny Subcommittee and Enhancement and Strategy Subcommittee. This faculty autonomy has the paradoxical effect of limiting the need for contact at the programme and module level between academics and students in Thessaloniki and their equivalents at Sheffield. However, there is a significant amount of communication between the departments in Sheffield and Thessaloniki, and this is growing.

32 Both staff and students met by the QAA team reported that they would like more visits and participation by teaching staff from Sheffield. While there are some staff links in research, summer school attendance, participation in periodic review and representation on University-level committees, the conclusion offered was that IF staff participate at faculty and University level with Sheffield, but not as systematically at department level. This is the opposite of a more common outcome of collaborative arrangements between UK universities and international partners, where contact is often stronger at the discipline level, through the use of link tutors and oversight by programme directors, than it is at the institutional level. However, discussions confirmed that there are in excess of 50 visits per year to Thessaloniki from Sheffield-based staff with less than 10 per cent of these at faculty or University level.

33 The QAA review team concluded that the approach to the management of standards and quality of programmes delivered by City College, and by the College with its partners, which is applied by the University of Sheffield, provides it with detailed and robust information with which to exercise oversight. In this respect, the status of City College as a sixth faculty of the University has the merit of supporting the comprehensive adoption and use by IF of UK methods of learning and teaching and their management. The comprehensive application by City College of the University of Sheffield's procedures for the management of the standards and quality of learning and teaching is a **positive feature**.

Learning opportunities and admissions processes

34 All students are registered for a University of Sheffield degree programme on admission and the acceptance letters come from Sheffield. IF manages and decides on admissions, following University procedures and criteria. The University plays no role in admissions other than the usual oversight for all faculties through periodic review or agreeing significant changes to admissions policies. One recent example included the recent update to the university recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedure, requiring all faculties including the IF to update their procedures. The admissions threshold for undergraduate programmes is, broadly, a good secondary education certificate (Apolysterion or International Baccalaureate) and an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) equivalent of 6.0. Admissions to master's programmes require at least the equivalent of a good second-class honours degree and an IELTS score of 6.5.

35 All applicants are interviewed and take placement tests for English language ability. Students whose English is weaker join a four-year stream in which Level 1 of the degree programme is delivered over two years in both English and Greek, to prepare students for wholly English teaching and assessment from Level 2. Significant initial and ongoing support is provided by the English Language Support Unit (ELSU) to all students. Week-long induction is comprehensive and includes guidance in the use of University facilities, particularly online access to e-journals and books.

36 Personal tutors are assigned to students and normally support the same student throughout their course. Tutors initiate meetings with students and provide open-door support and confidentiality. Tutors receive guidelines on what to discuss in tutorials, and a training session on how to manage pastoral issues and when to refer students to another service such as counselling. Tutorials are timetabled throughout the programme and are a key component of the student's experience.

37 Particular attention is paid to student attendance at lectures and classes. Attendance is recorded at all contact events and the College is proactive in contacting students whose attendance is less than excellent: weekly emails to students highlight absences and the maximum allowable limit. Course directors liaise with Heads of Department to identify the reasons for absences and departments will ask students to come in to discuss any problems. There is a correlation between non-attendance and ultimate unit failure. Both staff and students explained that in Greece, and more widely in the Balkans, higher education institutions do not traditionally focus on attendance. At one point there had been a marked problem at the delivery site in Sofia, where students had not understood the requirement for attendance and a high proportion had failed. The matter has been resolved.

38 Students met by the review team said that they had been attracted to City College by the opportunity to obtain a degree from a top UK university, by fees and living costs that are significantly lower than in the UK, by the small classes (rarely over 20) and by the personal support and guidance offered by the College. They confirmed that these aspects of the student experience had been delivered, including access to the various Sheffield virtual learning environments, the personal tutor and tutorial group support. Students also confirmed the effective operation of the student representation system. There was evidence of student participation in a wide range of College committees and evaluation processes. The participation of student representatives in committees responsible for the management of learning and teaching is a **positive feature**.

39 The review team saw Student Handbooks in English for all programmes. They provide clear and comprehensive guidance on all aspects of learning and assessment, as well as information about sources and forms of extracurricular events and support, including assistance from the College and University in obtaining placements and a variety

of employability skills. The handbooks provide guidance on complaints and appeals processes, both within the College and to the University, and make it clear that general University regulations on complaints and appeals apply to IF students. In addition, the documentation reviewed by the QAA team, the descriptions of teaching and support reported by students, and the comments of external examiners' reports confirmed the high quality of the academic and professional staff at IF and their comprehensive understanding of Sheffield's approach to the provision of higher education. This is a **positive feature**.

40 A variety of careers advice is offered to students. There is an annual careers fair and a series of professional development seminars on topics such as CV development and interview techniques. The IF has direct links to several companies that email job opportunities to students weekly. It is currently difficult to gain employment in Greece, so many undergraduates planned to develop a specialism through master's programme study.

41 The management of the estate, finance and staff is not subject to oversight by the University of Sheffield's Council, although the University works closely with IF on developing staff and staff allocation to teaching. The management of physical learning resources supporting student learning is subject to University advice and recommendation, as for all other faculties, through processes of Periodic Review and Annual Reflection. IF operates the University of Sheffield's guidelines for staff appointment, development and promotion, and senior promotions proposals are referred to the University's Readerships and Personal Chairs Committee. Nominations are considered for Senate Awards in the same categories as for staff across the University, and two such awards have been awarded to IF staff in the last three years.

Information on higher education provision

42 Public information provided by City College in documents and online is almost entirely in English. There is a limited amount of publicity material issued in Greek, and this is checked by close collaboration between the College and University marketing departments.

43 Students graduating from IF receive degree certificates identical to those provided to students who studied in the UK at Sheffield. The certificate does not indicate where study has taken place. The accompanying Official Transcript indicates: 'attendance at City College, International Faculty of the University of Sheffield'. The Diploma Supplement records that the name and status of the institution administering studies is 'City College, an International Faculty of the University of Sheffield'.

Conclusion

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the University and its partner's strategy for seeking external professional accreditation for a range of programmes offered at the College (paragraph 31)
- the comprehensive application by City College of the University of Sheffield's procedures for the management of the standards and quality of learning and teaching (paragraph 34)
- the participation of student representatives in committees responsible for the management of learning and teaching (paragraph 39)
- the high quality of the academic and professional staff at IF and their comprehensive understanding of Sheffield's approach to the provision of higher education (paragraph 40).

Recommendations

The University of Sheffield is recommended to take the following action:

- continue to work with City College on the longer-term format of its contractual relationship both with City College and its partners throughout the Balkans (paragraph 24).

University of Sheffield's response to the review report

The University of Sheffield and City College take great pride in our long established partnership, working together to provide quality higher education in Thessaloniki and across the Balkans. We hope that integrating City College as the International Faculty of the University is seen as an exemplar for the sector.

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