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Into founder says his private capital supports public work

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By [Melanie Newman](#)

'Old-school Blairite' defends company's English-language courses. Melanie Newman reports

Andrew Colin is not the most popular man with the higher education trade unions.

As chairman and owner of Into University Partnerships, the private provider of English-language courses for foreign students, he has been accused by the University and College Union of leading the "creeping privatisation" of UK higher education.

Into's joint ventures with the universities of East Anglia, Newcastle and Exeter have sparked protests and claims that it is undermining terms and conditions. As *Times Higher Education* went to press, the Combined Union Committee of Glasgow Caledonian University was organising a 1 May protest against plans by the university to use Into to "recruit and teach" international students, claiming "massive support".

But in an interview with *Times Higher Education* this week, Mr Colin set out his plans for ambitious expansion into UK universities and launched a point-by-point defence of his company. He said Into was countering the "chronic under-investment" in English-language programmes that threatened the UK's share of the international student market and argued that his vocal critics were motivated by simple ideology.

One key concern of the company's critics is a lack of financial transparency - illustrated by Into's failure to file its accounts on time.

Mr Colin said this was a simple mistake. Accounts for 2006 are now filed, and the next set of accounts, due to be filed in May, will show a £1.7 million loss, he confirmed.

The deficit, which he said was "totally in line with projections", relates to the cost of maintaining a large international marketing team. He has personally invested more than £8.5 million in Into and its subsidiary property companies, £3.7 million of which has gone on marketing. "By our third year, we will be well beyond break-even," he said.

As Mr Colin is also chairman of a property investment and development businesses, critics have also alleged that making money from property is a prime motivation for him. For each joint venture, Into has set up a subsidiary to develop a site and lease the building back to the host university.

Mr Colin denies that he expects to make more money out of the estate than student recruitment, maintaining that the union's opposition is simply ideological.

"I'm an old-fashioned Blairite. I believe that private capital can support public provision, and the UCU is opposed to that ideologically ... The union sees Into as a profound threat to higher education structures, but it isn't meant to be that."

One UCU member from the University of East Anglia explained that their opposition was to "the idea that the private sector is essentially exploiting public-sector resources".

Mr Colin said: "I've asked for a dialogue with the UCU, but they won't talk to us. The union causes a lot of anxiety and talk about standards and job losses, they don't mention the fact that we are creating jobs and that the university is responsible for academic standards."

On terms and conditions, universities can choose whether to transfer staff to Into or to keep them in university employment. Mr Colin admits, however, to paying Into staff less than those in equivalent positions in the

university.

"Rates of pay are probably worse," he said, but he added that Into compares well with the UK's private English-language teaching market. Into is carrying out a study to provide benchmarks for its employees, he said.

At Newcastle University, a UCU spokesman claimed that Into had fallen short of its teacher recruitment targets, which meant class sizes had gone up from 12 to 16 and that new employees had no experience of teaching academic English.

An Into spokesman said class size for English was standard at all its centres, with 16 regarded as the optimal size. He added that Into's appointments criteria were the same as those for university-based staff.

Although Mr Colin may lack union support, he does have a powerful backer in David Eastwood, chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. As vice-chancellor of the UEA, he was a driving force behind the first Into joint venture.

"I'd been helping David Eastwood with an international project at UEA, and he asked whether I would do a joint venture," Mr Colin said. "We discussed outsourcing, and David said that international recruitment was strategic to the university and that he didn't want to lose control. We created the 50:50 joint venture so that the university retained control."

Mr Colin set up Into in 2005 with the aim of increasing the number of UEA's 40 "pathway" students to 500 in five years. "We got them in two," he said.

Now about 70 per cent of students meet the qualification criteria for access to the host institution. "That gives you 1,000 extra international students on campus over three years," Mr Colin said. The venture, he said, had also contributed significantly to a 40 per cent increase in direct international recruitment at UEA since 2005.

Mr Colin wants to see 25 Into centres set up by 2012, about 11 of them in the UK. As well as Glasgow Caledonian and Essex, the company is about to sign a deal with the University of Manchester.

"English-language programmes have suffered from chronic underinvestment in the UK, compared with Australia," he said. "We believe the UK will perform poorly in international recruitment if there is no investment in high-quality provision."

melanie.newman@tsleducation.com.