

Dr Rowena Harper
President
Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL)
by email - Rowena.Harper@unisa.edu.au

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Dear Rowena

NTEU concern with outsourcing of tutorial and student support services

Noting the AALL 2017 Conference next week, including your AGM on 3rd November, I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the National Tertiary Education Union's concerns about the matter of outsourcing of tutorial students support services through Studiosity (formerly YourTutor) and like companies.

I request that you table this letter at your AGM and also make it available to AALL members because as, I am sure you understand, this is a serious issue with significant implications for the quality of teaching and student support, the standing of the disciplinary area (ALL), and for staff.

The recent NTEU National Council meeting, in considering amendments to our higher education funding platform, added opposition to the

“Allocation of funding and equity subsidies to for-profit, third-party academic service providers. Third party services that are designed outside of, and are unaccountable to, systems of academic governance, erode the public education system's academic integrity, intellectual freedom and teaching standards. Universities' adoption of such so-called academic services is an example of outsourcing and offshoring of Australian tertiary sector jobs by stealth.”

This matter was drawn to the NTEU's attention earlier this year by a number of members, concerned about the lack of consultation with staff, and transparency of process by which arrangements were being contracted with these for-profit companies.

We were also advised that concerns, raised by experts in the field, about the performance of YourTutor/Studiosity and similar companies addressing the pedagogical model; the qualifications and working conditions of staff; and the appropriateness of the delivery model for the student cohort; were not answered by the proponents. The NTEU is highly concerned that students' needs and staff employment rights may be compromised as universities seek a cheaper alternative.

Once we were advised that there may be a possibility that HEPPP funds were being used to pay for such contracts, the NTEU was bound to raise the matter with the Office of the Minister for Education, Senator Simon Birmingham.

In our letter to Senator Birmingham, NTEU noted the following:

“A number of our members have raised specific concerns about contracts their universities have entered into with a company called YourTutor for the provision of one-on-one study assistance. According to the YourTutor website its services include connecting live with an expert when you are stuck and 'writing feedback' on draft essays within 24 hours.

All of YourTutor's services are online and anonymous. The services are sometimes widely publicised on the campuses of participating universities.

Our members indicate that in some cases these arrangements have been introduced without approval by academic boards or consultation with academic staff. In some circumstances students were provided access to these services via their learning support management systems, without the knowledge of their tutors and (even in some cases) course coordinators.

In researching the extent of YourTutor's arrangement with Australian universities, we have become aware of a number of other similar academic outsourcing arrangements with for-profit companies such as Keypath Education, Didasko Group, and Smarthinking. These contracts involve the delivery of academic support or tutorial services but in some cases might even extend into online teaching.

The NTEU is concerned about the pedagogy, academic integrity, professional and quality implications of the contracting out of teaching and support services, which are normally delivered in an integrated program designed to cater for specific student cohorts, whilst maintaining the quality of the degrees.

According to their submission to the ACIL Allen Consulting/Wallis Consulting commissioned Review of the Higher Education Partnership and Participation Program (HEPPP), Your Tutor:

- Provides services to 35% of universities and has active partnerships with Charles Sturt University, Edith Cowan University, Federation University, James Cook University, RMIT University, Southern Cross University, University of Canberra, University of South Australia, University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Wollongong and Western Sydney University; and*
- Many universities include YourTutor as a significant part of their HEPPP-funded outreach programs, targeted towards cohorts of high school, TAFE or pathways college students in regional schools and from low SES backgrounds.*

The NTEU could perhaps see a role for such services if they were complementary and used to support existing services, and if all involved, including TEQSA could be assured that they employed appropriately-qualified staff, employed on similar terms to university staff. However, based on information obtained from our members, we understand these arrangements constitute external third parties providing what are clearly core educational, student support and outreach activities. That is, these services are being used as a substitute for face-to-face tutorials and student support services. In addition to the obvious industrial issues, there are several other very serious issues including:

- the quality and accountability of the services provided;*
- the pedagogy associated with online-only support, especially amongst at-risk student cohorts;*
- academic integrity, especially associated with the writing feedback service;*
- the loss of tutorial, student support or learning and teaching positions;*
- the capacity for existing university governance structures (especially Academic Board) to provide robust oversight of these services including questions of academic integrity;*
- attempts to manipulate or game the TEQSA risk assessment framework by hiding the increase of casual employment via third party contracts; and*
- inappropriate use of public funding, specifically HEPPP funding.*

We are asking that you consider the circumstances under which you believe that it is appropriate for a university to outsource core educational and support services, and whether it is appropriate that HEPPP funding be used for such arrangements.”

I will advise you of the response from the Minister's office when we receive it.

I wish you, the AALL, and all the conference presenters and participants well in your deliberations, and offer any assistance I can provide.

Regards
Jeannie

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cc: 2017 AALL Conference Organisers: Ms Corrina Ridley and Dr Fiona Henderson