



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

19 October 2015

NIAR 553-2015

Eóin Murphy

Ulster University Cuts: School of Modern Languages

This paper, commissioned by the Committee for Employment and Learning, discusses the available information on the announced cutting of the School of Modern Languages from Ulster University.

Introduction

Relying on currently available information, this paper is prepared for the Committee for Employment and Learning (CEL), seeking to inform CEL's discussion about the announced cut of the School of Modern Languages at Ulster University (Ulster). The paper is presented as follows:

- **Section 1:** An overview of Ulster's School of Modern Languages at present and a brief comparison with the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB);
- **Section 2:** A discussion about the cuts at Ulster;
- **Section 3:** An outline of student figures at Ulster's School of Modern Languages and a brief comparison with QUB's;
- **Section 4:** A discussion of key findings of a survey examining the satisfaction of enrolled students at the School of Modern Languages; and,
- **Section 5:** A summation of key points made throughout the paper..

1 Ulster School of Modern Languages at Present

Since its inception, the School of Modern Languages at Ulster University has had a number of successes, including:¹

In 2005, the School was designated as a national Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in the area of multimedia language learning.

And:

In 2011, the University was granted the status of Northern Ireland Confucius Institute.

To date the School runs six main subject areas for study:²

- Applied Languages;
- English as a second Language (ESL);
- French;
- Spanish;
- German; and,
- Chinese.

In July 2014, the School of Modern Languages listed 42 available courses at the School, covering the six main subject areas. Of these 42: 35 were at degree level;

¹ Internet Archive, Ulster University, School of Modern Languages,
<https://web.archive.org/web/20121102103556/http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/ml/>

² Ulster University, School of Modern Languages, <http://arts.ulster.ac.uk/ml/>

three at Masters level; three were modular language programmes; and, one was at Diploma level.³

In terms of staffing, there are eleven academic employees in the School of Modern Languages and three support staff. It should be noted that these employees work in French, German, Spanish and Chinese.⁴

1.1 QUB

In comparison, QUB offers courses in French, Spanish, Portuguese and Irish. (Please note that Irish is taught in the Faculty of Arts at Ulster, not the School of Modern Languages.)

A RaiSe review of QUB's advertised courses for 2016 entry found: 35 courses at degree level which included a language component; and, a further five post-graduate courses.⁵

2 The Cuts at Ulster University

Ulster has had a reduction in its Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) block grant allocation⁶ from £79,847,774 (2014-15 opening position) to £70,768,688 (2015-16). This is a reduction of £9,079,086 or 11.37% over one year.⁷

Ulster announced in June 2015 that as a result of these budget cuts, it would be reducing its student intake by 1,250 places, and would be cutting approximately 210 staff posts over the next three years.⁸

On 2 September 2015, Ulster further announced the implementation of these cuts, identifying six broad subject areas that would be impacted:⁹

- Interior Design;
- Marine Science;
- Computing;
- Maths;
- Business Management; and,
- Modern Languages/Translation.

³ Internet Archive, 4 July 2014, Ulster University, School of Modern Languages, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121102103556/http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/ml/>

⁴ Ulster University, School of Modern Languages, prospective students, staff lists for each subject group

⁵ Queen's University Belfast, Course Finder, 2016/17 entry, <http://www.qub.ac.uk/home/StudyatQueens/CourseFinder/>

⁶ Correspondence received from DEL, 14 September 2015

⁷ Please note, each of the HEIs sustained a different percentage reduction for various reasons. The two universities had previously received differing amounts of funding under the EJI with UU receiving over 40% more than QUB. Also the recent results of the REF exercise (Research Excellence Framework) resulted in QUB receiving more research funding from the already reduced funding available

⁸ BBC News, Meredith R, 18 June 2015, Ulster University: Funding reduction sees cuts to jobs and student places, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-33185697>

⁹ Ulster University, 2 September 2015, Press Release

Of these, Ulster clarified that Interior Design and Modern Languages/Translation would be closed in their entirety. The remaining courses would be rationalised, with some subjects transferred between campuses, or consolidated.¹⁰

On 8 September 2015, in response to an Assembly Question, the Minister for Employment and Learning stated that:¹¹

Ulster University has confirmed that it will no longer be offering Modern Languages as a component of joint degrees.

The Minister further clarified this in September 2015 saying that all BA and MA subjects in Applied Languages and Translations would no longer be running. In addition, he confirmed that all combinations involving Chinese, French, German, Spanish and English as a second language would cease to be offered.¹² (As noted earlier, Irish is taught in a separate faculty at Ulster.) Taking this into account, and based on information published by Ulster University, an additional 21 full time undergraduate courses would be impacted by the above-stated cut, totalling 63 courses run by the School of Modern Languages.¹³

3 Student Figures

This section provides figures for student applications and acceptances in the School of Modern Languages at Ulster. Please note acceptance is defined as an applicant who has been placed for entry into higher education.

It also provides figures for new entrants.

Where possible, data for the School of Modern Languages at QUB have been provided as a comparator.

3.1 Applications and Acceptances

Table 1 below details information sourced from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)¹⁴ regarding applications to the School of Modern Languages in Ulster. It should be noted that the data is provided in broad subject groups rather than specific courses.

The tables below only provide for language courses. A number of the courses offered at both Ulster and QUB include language modules, but applications would be made through other faculties.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Northern Ireland Assembly, AQW 48562/11-16

¹² Northern Ireland Assembly, AQW 49094/11-16

¹³ Internet Archive, 4 July 2014, Ulster University, School of Modern Languages, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121102103556/http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/ml/>

¹⁴ UCAS is an independent charity providing information, advice, and admissions services. It provides the vast majority of admission services for access to UK Universities.

As such, the information below does not provide a complete picture of the number of students applying to undertake language courses at either university and as such should be taken as indicative only.

Table 1: Applications to NI Universities by broad subject groups¹⁵

University	Subject Group	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Queen's University Belfast	European languages, literature and related	230	230	245	250	235
	Non-European languages, literature and related	-	-	-	-	-
Ulster University	European languages, literature and related	215	220	185	175	195
	Non-European languages, literature and related	10	15	0	0	0

It should be noted that QUB does not run any non-European language courses, and as such had no applicants during the period presented.¹⁶

As can be seen in Table 1 above, both Ulster and QUB have had some variations in applications to language courses; although QUB does have a higher number of applications from 2012 on.

Table 2 on the page following provides the number of acceptances for these courses.

There are a number of items within Table 2 below, which may be of note. QUB acceptances held relatively steady, with between 50 – 60 acceptances across the five year period shown.

Ulster had a much greater variation in its acceptances, ranging from 20 in 2011 to 40 in 2014.

¹⁵ UCAS, End of cycle 2014 provider level statistics, Applications by provider and subject group, https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/hep_level_report_2014-dr4_016_03.pdf

¹⁶ Queen's University Belfast, Course Finder, 2016/17 entry, <http://www.qub.ac.uk/home/StudyatQueens/CourseFinder/>

Table 2: Acceptances by NI Universities by broad subject groups¹⁷

University	Subject Group	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Queen's University Belfast	European languages, literature and related	55	55	55	60	50
	Non-European languages, literature and related	0	0	0	0	0
Ulster University	European languages, literature and related	40	20	30	25	40
	Non-European languages, literature and related	0	0	0	0	0

It should also be noted that in 2010 and 2011, Ulster had a number of applications to non-European languages (10 and 15 respectively). However, the figure for acceptances in both these cases is zero.

This may be a result of a number of reasons, including the results received by those who applied to Ulster. However, with the data available, it is not possible to identify why there is such a variation in numbers.

Whilst applications to a course can potentially determine demand, enrolments will indicate how many people accepted an offer from the university and then took part in it.

3.2 New Entrants

Acceptance on to a course does not necessarily mean attendance. As such, this sub-section provides the available data on those who started ('new entrants') a course with a language component at Ulster and QUB.

In addition, the data gathered (and provided by) Ulster and QUB covers all students who entered a course with a language component. As such, it provides a more complete picture of those taking part in language courses than that available from the UCAS data discussed in sub-section 3.1.

Using data published by Ulster, it is possible to identify the number of new entrants to Modern Languages courses for the last five academic years. It should be noted that

¹⁷ UCAS, End of cycle 2014 provider level statistics, Acceptances by provider and subject group

this information covers all courses with a language component, and as such the number of entrants is higher than that provided in the acceptance data discusses in sub-section 3.1.¹⁸

- 2010/11: 54;
- 2011/12: 44;
- 2012/13: 58;
- 2013/14: 38; and,
- 2014/15: 42.

This information covers all undergraduate courses at Ulster, which have a language component and would have no new entrants following implementation of the cuts.

For 2014/15 the language course with the most new entrants was BA Honours Applied Languages and Translation - French and Spanish - with six new entrants.

In contrast, when considering new entrants for all faculties at Ulster, BA Honours Nursing (Adult) had the highest number of new entrants with 171.

Indeed, of the 4,350 new entrants for Ulster in 2014/15, the Arts Faculty (of which the School of Modern Languages was part of) had the lowest number of new entrants at 467 overall.

The Faculty of Arts ran 82 courses in 2014/2015, with 467 students, the lowest number of enrolments at Ulster. The Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment has the next highest number of enrolled new students, at 503 for its 25 courses.

For comparison purposes, RaISe contacted QUB to ascertain the number of undergraduate students in its School of Modern Languages. QUB provided data on enrolments for the most recent three academic years.¹⁹

- 2012/13: 138;
- 2013/14: 151; and,
- 2014/15: 150.

It should be noted that the data:

Represent(s) students taking any degree pathway that involves a language at degree level over the last three years.

As can be seen, QUB has a significantly higher number of new entrants starting degrees with a language component.

¹⁸ Ulster University, Student Planning and Information Development,
http://www.ulster.ac.uk/finance/planning/information_development/

¹⁹ Correspondence from Queen's University, Belfast, 5 October 2015

The QUB data includes those enrolled in Irish Language courses (Irish Language is a separate faculty in Ulster). In addition, QUB does not run the same language courses as Ulster. In QUB, degrees are offered in French, Spanish, Portuguese and Irish.

For comparison purposes, courses that consist of only Irish have been removed from the QUB data. Hence, the following figures are for French, Spanish and Portuguese:

- 2012/13: 123;
- 2013/14: 145; and,
- 2014/15: 130.

The number of entrants to the QUB School of Modern Languages remains significantly higher than that of Ulster.

3.3 Total Number of Students

CEL Members may wish to note that RaISe has requested clarification from the universities regarding the figures discussed below, but a reply was not available at the time of writing. As soon as the information is provided to RaISe, this paper will be updated and reissued.

Nonetheless, a review of the currently available information published on the Ulster website relates to “Actual Student Load”. Such data forms a key element of a university's statutory returns, which determines a university's teaching block grant. This data is also used internally both to drive the allocation of block grant and fees in a university's management accounts, and to advise and assist with general planning and budget allocation processes.²⁰

Actual student load operates in a similar manner to “Full-Time Equivalents” in the sphere of employment when analysing employment figures. As such, actual student load provides equivalency for students who are undertaking a degree course which includes a modern language component (be that as a single, joint or combined degree).

This data is gathered by a university and appears to be available only at the “School” level. For Ulster, it was:²¹

- 2012/13: 149.94;²²
- 2013/14: 132.84; and,
- 2014/15: 139.96.

²⁰ Ulster University, Student planning and information development,
http://www.ulster.ac.uk/finance/planning/information_development/

²¹ Ulster University, Actual Student Load, Faculty of Arts, 2014/15, 2013/14 and 2012/13,
http://www.ulster.ac.uk/finance/planning/strategic_development/actual_student_load/1213/

²² Please note, the table for 2012/13 states that it “excludes GB new entrants”. It is not known if the data for 2013/14 and 2014/15 also excludes this information, but as it is used for financial planning and providing data to DEL for MaSN claims, and GB students are excluded from the MaSN cap it is reasonable to assume that GB students are also not included in the 13/14 and 15/16 data.

3.3.1 QUB

Following an information request, QUB provided the following information on total student undergraduate numbers in the School of Modern Languages:²³

- 2012/13: 522;
- 2013/14: 511; and,
- 2014/15: 524.

As with the intake data, numbers relevant to Irish Language courses, which do not have another modern language component, have been removed from the information below for French, Spanish and Portuguese at QUB:

- 2012/13: 467;
- 2013/14: 467; and,
- 2014/15: 482.

As can be seen, QUB has a much higher number of students than Ulster. QUB noted that:²⁴

We have 4 years' worth of UG students at any one time in the foreign languages (i.e. not Irish) because of the year abroad [as such] you will see that the UG student population is well over three times the intake figure and closer to four times.

4 Student Satisfaction Survey – Key Findings

Each year the National Union of Students carries out the National Student Survey (NSS). This asks final year students questions regarding the perceived quality of the course they have been on.

Tables 3 and 4²⁵ below provide the NSS results, as reported by *Which? University*. The tables also include data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), detailing information on qualifications outcome, gender of participants and dropout rates.

Whilst it is not possible to identify individual courses as a result of the low numbers of respondents, the study does provide some analysis under broad subject headings.

²³ Correspondence with Queen's University Belfast, 5 October 2015

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Which University?, <http://university.which.co.uk/> using National Student Survey and Higher Education Statistics Agency data

Table 3: Students perceptions of language courses at Ulster University

	Overall student satisfaction	Student score	Staff made the subject interesting	Feedback on work has been helpful	Feedback on work has been prompt	Staff are good at explaining things	Received sufficient advice and support	2:1 or above	Male/Female	Drop out rate
French Studies	92%	85%	85%	86%	90%	92%	87%	46%	75% female	15%
Spanish Studies	93%	84%	85%	78%	95%	93%	95%	57%	75% female	14%
German Studies	93%	78%	86%	70%	61%	93%	66%	65%	56% female	13%

Table 4: Students perceptions of language courses at Queen's University Belfast²⁶

	Overall student satisfaction	Student score	Staff made the subject interesting	Feedback on work has been helpful	Feedback on work has been prompt	Staff are good at explaining things	Received sufficient advice and support	2:1 or above	Male/Female	Drop out rate
French Studies	98%	93%	96%	88%	90%	98%	91%	88%	74% are female	9%
Spanish Studies	97%	92%	99%	91%	88%	97%	94%	84%	69% are female	8%
Portuguese Studies	97%	92%	99%	91%	88%	97%	94%	-	-	-
Celtic Studies (Irish)	100%	92%	100%	84%	69%	100%	88%	60%	73% are female	5%

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4 above, there is some differences in the results between Ulster and QUB. Overall student satisfaction was higher in QUB than in Ulster, with a particular difference in areas such as the helpfulness of feedback on work.

Of particular note are the differences in grade achievement. In Ulster, French Studies had a rate of 46% of students receiving a 2.1 degree or higher. In QUB this was 88%.

There is a similar gap in Spanish studies of 57% for Ulster and 84% for QUB.

Drop-out rates are also higher for Ulster students than QUB students.

5 Summary

Based on the available data, Ulster and QUB have had similar levels of applications to entry into their language courses. QUB, however, has a more stable level of

²⁶ Please note, dashes indicate where no data was available.

acceptances onto courses, with the UCAS figures for Ulster showing a great deal of variation in the numbers of people accepting offers to study there.

It should be noted that there may be a number of reasons for this, including people accepting offers from other universities or deferring for a year. However, based on the available data, it is not possible to identify any specific reason for this variation in acceptances.

As per the new entrant data, it can be seen that Ulster has a much lower number of new entrants than QUB. In 2014/15, Ulster had 42 new undergraduate entrants in comparison to 130 in QUB (excluding students studying Irish).

This difference in student numbers is further reflected in the total number of language students at each university. Whilst it has not been possible to provide direct comparisons due to differences in the available data, the total number of language students in QUB appears to be much higher than that at Ulster.

The NSS data shows that there is some difference in student perceptions around the quality of the language courses at Ulster and QUB. Of most note, however, is the HESA data on outcomes. Ulster had a much higher dropout rate from its language courses than QUB; and a significantly lower percentage of students gaining a 2:1 degree or higher.

The CEL may wish to consider the following scrutiny points:

- **Was the DEL informed as to how the reductions in student places were to be taken?**
- **Will the closure of the School of Modern Languages at Ulster have any implications for the QUB school, such as increased demand or grade inflation?**
- **Classes teaching English as a second language have been cut as part of the closure of the School of Modern Languages. How will this impact on Ulster's recruitment of international students?**
- **How will the closure of teaching in Chinese impact the Confucius Institute?**