

## **Monitoring and reducing student withdrawals: what International Student Offices can learn from American universities (North Carolina State University and Maryland University)**

*by Adriana Crear, International Student Advisor, University of Surrey*

### **Objectives of the visit**

There were two aims for this PMI-sponsored visit to the USA. Firstly, to establish what can be learned from best practice in American universities with regard to monitoring the reasons for and reducing the numbers of international students who withdraw from their courses before completing their degree.

Secondly, to investigate the role International Offices can play in monitoring and preventing such withdrawals by taking an active part in the student experience and by communicating with other involved parties at the university.

### **Background - importance of withdrawals**

In view of recent changes to immigration rules, British universities need to report to the Home Office every case of a student who is no longer participating in their studies or who has taken unauthorised absence. Reporting is one of the obligations which British universities need to fulfil in order to maintain Highly Trusted Sponsor status. Obviously reporting is a last resort and universities would like to do all they can to avoid situations which could lead to reporting.

In an increasingly competitive sector, universities need to ensure student satisfaction. They spend considerable sums on recruiting international students, and word-of-mouth remains a powerful advertising tool. Universities cannot afford to have students returning to their home countries with negative feedback. Gathering information on the reasons for withdrawals and using this to work on reducing them can result in more students succeeding and leaving the UK happy with their experiences here.

At the University of Surrey in the academic year 2009-10, around 6.7% of the international student population withdrew from their courses. Currently there is little information gathered about the reasons for such withdrawals. In my opinion, identifying these reasons could prevent some future withdrawals and avoid the same situation arising again.

### **Destination**

The USA was selected because they have a reporting system which has now been operating for several years. This could provide a useful guide to the future demands and requirements of the UK Border Agency scheme coming into force in the UK.

I was able to build on existing contacts at the University of Surrey and arrange visits and meetings with two universities in the United States – North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Maryland University, in Maryland, near Washington DC. Both universities have similar numbers of international students to the University of Surrey. And both universities, like the University of Surrey, have strong research backgrounds and offer similar subjects, such as engineering, science and management.

Among the departments I visited in NCSU were The Office of International Services, Enrolment Management and Services, The Graduate School, Office of Advising Support, Undergraduate Tutorial Centre and Counselling Centre.

At the University of Maryland I visited The Office of International Services, Graduate and Undergraduate Admissions, Maryland English Institute, Study Abroad Office, Office of Student Affairs at the College of Arts and Humanities. All these offices were identified by my hosts as playing a very important part in the life of international students and as having an influence on how they may feel about a university they attend.

North Carolina University is a large university with over 30,000 students, including almost 2,000 international students from 111 countries. The largest numbers are from India (631) and China (494). It has been ranked fourth in the US Public University League table. The Graduate School is responsible for administering over 220 different graduate degrees and has about 7,400 students, both home and international.

The University of Maryland is ranked number 18 among US Public Research Universities. In total there are over 35,000 students, including 3,132 international students from 133 different countries, mainly from China (799), India (767) and South Korea (288).

### **Summary of outcomes**

The philosophy of American education is, "Just in time, just in case". Based on my experience during my visit, this means that US universities are very proactive and vigilant in the way they deal with and care about all their students, but in particular their international students. I would highlight this aspect as the main outcome of my visit.

The visit showed the importance US universities attach to communication between various departments in a university from the point of view of international students. Good channels of communication between members of staff who are in any way connected to a student may prevent certain situations which could lead a student to withdrawal.

I was also very impressed with the American sense of hospitality. In both universities, there was a real feeling that all students, especially international ones, are looked after during the whole academic year, from the moment of their arrival to the moment of their departure.

I was especially impressed with the role of academic advisers in NCSU and Maryland in communication with students, and between them and various departments during their studies. Academic members volunteer, and are trained, to be student advisers and therefore provide a valuable link between students and other offices, including the International Office.

The visit enabled me to find out how other International Offices look after their students during the academic year and how they monitor their withdrawals. Some of their ideas could be implemented at the University of Surrey and might be relevant for other institutions too.

This report will highlight three examples of this ethos of active support and hospitality towards international students and how this improves their learning experience and reduces the risk of withdrawal from the course. I would like to stress how, throughout my visit, mentoring, coaching

and advising, which were described as essential to supporting students in helping them achieve their academic goals, were helping to reduce the number of withdrawals.

### **Office of International Services (OIS) at North Carolina State (NCSU) and Maryland**

Both universities have large and well resourced Offices of International Services (International Offices). In both universities, most international students are enrolled in the graduate schools. In NCSU, there are only 200 international undergraduate students, compared to 1,600 postgraduate students. At Maryland there are 595 international undergraduate students and about 2,537 international postgraduate students.

As well as giving advice on immigration issues, the OIS at NCSU provides pre-arrival information and deals with queries about finance and housing. The office offers a number of online orientation programmes that students are advised to access before arrival. During the academic year, the OIS organises various events such as *'Breaking Bread'*, a hosting programme which gives international students an opportunity to spend time with American families and learn about American culture.

Another programme called *'Culture Corps'* sends international students and scholars out into the Raleigh community which develops connections between the local community, international students and the university in general.

Another interesting programme offered by the OIS is *'International Friendship Partners'*. It is an active matching programme between international students and their spouses with university academics and home students within each faculty. This programme really seems to enable international students to establish friendships and social networks very shortly after their arrival on campus. In my opinion, all the above activities play a very important role in the retention of international students.

NCSU has very good retention rates at undergraduate and Masters levels. However, NCSU were very open about the drop-off rate of their PhD students. This has been an area of concern and a lot has been done to try and improve this situation. According to the experience of the Graduate School there are two important facts which determined retention - finance and mentoring/recruitment. The Graduate School has taken actions in both areas to improve retention:

*Finance* - stricter verification of whether international students can afford to pay tuition fees before admission and providing them with scholarships and funding. Students currently need to provide a Certificate of Financial Capability.

*Mentoring/recruitment* - tighter selection of international students being admitted to the University to ensure that they can meet the academic challenges. There are clear statements in all sources of information provided by the University about the expectations and high academic standards expected of students. Most importantly, resources have been put in place to support students through additional mentoring to ensure that students are aware of the help and support they can get from their departments and the University as a whole. Mentors assist not only with academic support, but also areas such as finance or accommodation problems. This mentoring role has been developed over recent years. Each academic is trained to be a mentor and stays in touch with their students on a regular basis. This active intervention has improved retention rates in recent years.

The OIS in Maryland also plays a very active role in the lives of international students. There are five advisers who provide advice to 3,132 students.

The OIS prepares and runs a range of activities and services aimed at integrating international students to the life of the University as much as possible. They believe that by doing so students will be more open and willing to come forward with any problems or difficulties they may have that could cause them to drop out.

These activities include: *orientation programmes* – students are asked to arrive 30 days before the new academic year begins. During orientation there are numerous welcome sessions, a range of workshops about employment and work in the US in general and the Maryland area in particular, issues relating to spouses, families, education, housing, health and insurance and the US classroom culture. I especially liked that the OIS actively promotes an internet chat room for the students who for two hours every day can discuss various issues with staff members.

The OIS also organises a *coffee hour* once a week sponsored by different departments at the University. The international students can get together with academic and administrative staff from various departments, including the OIS staff. It is a very effective social and study networking forum. The OIS also organises at least one *international event* each month with an online calendar which international students can access to see what is coming up.

I also liked the way that all the OIS advisers meet for about two hours on Fridays and share information about the week, reviewing events and the cases that occurred and considering possible ideas and solutions. There is a meeting with the Students' Union once a week on a Friday aimed at ensuring international students are included and engaged in the wider activities of the University. The importance of integrating the students within the University was stressed to me several times.

Retention in Maryland is high and international students rarely drop out. There are only about ten students every academic year who do not complete their courses. Staff at Maryland believe this is because of the strength of their selection procedures which are rigorous, particularly with regard to the financial status of prospective students.

### **Importance of academic advising - Office of Advising and Support, Information and Services (OASIS) at NCSU**

It was very interesting to see the Office of Advising, Support, Information and Services (OASIS) at NCSU. The office is available to all undergraduate students across the university. OASIS provides an extensive range of academic advice, as well as coaching and mentoring services. These can be accessed face-to-face or online. Its goal is to ensure the academic success of all undergraduate students.

Students are able to go to the office with any academic queries or concerns they may have, from wanting to change course to seeking future career advice. OASIS also organises SMART workshops on time management, note-taking, essay planning and writing, and exam techniques.

Students with particular difficulties can receive one-to-one coaching twice a month. Coaches sign a contract with each student. They meet each student for two hours at the beginning of

each semester to discuss issues and review progress. Coaches need to write status forms about the students, and they then inform the OASIS as well as the OIS. The exact content of meeting between students and coaches is confidential but a record is kept that students approached the office for coaching or were referred by their department. The OASIS also runs a very successful Peer Mentoring scheme where new students can be mentored and supported by existing students. This works particularly well for international students and has proved to be an excellent way of making new, supportive friendships and contacts.

### **Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS): monitoring students at NCSU and Maryland**

The immigration regulations recently introduced by the UK Border Agency relating to international students are very similar to those already in place in the USA. It is the responsibility of the OIS to provide the link between the university and the US government.

The US Immigration Service requires the following information each semester on every international student from every Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certified school:

- name, date of birth, country of birth, country of citizenship, source and amount of financial resources, academic program, level of study, program start and end dates
- arrival and enrollment or failure to enroll
- a change of the student or dependent's legal name or address
- graduation prior to the end date listed on their visa
- academic or disciplinary actions taken due to criminal conviction
- registration for less than a full course of study without *prior* authorization
- termination date and reason for termination
- other data generated by standard procedures such as program extension, school transfer, change in level of study, employment authorization, and reinstatement
- failure to complete the academic program or program objective

The SEVIS database therefore contains the students' biographical data, address, and place of study, as well as course start and end dates. Within 30 days following the deadline for enrolling for classes, the OIS is required to report if students have failed to enrol. Moreover, during each term or session, schools are required to report within 30 days details such as whether a student dropped below the minimum number of hours of study for a full-time course without prior authorisation, or failed to advise on their current address.

Within 21 days, schools are required to report any 'reportable events' such as: failure to complete the programme; change of name or address; early graduation or completion of programme; any disciplinary action taken by the university and/or any criminal convictions. The OIS is also required to respond within 21 days to any other request made by SEVIS with respect to the current status of any student.

The Department for Homeland Security has argued that these details have been kept by schools and universities for decades. The difference introduced by SEVIS is that this data is now collected centrally on a live database and can be accessed by a range of governmental bodies in the US and abroad. Failure to comply with the demands of the above can lead to a student's SEVIS record being terminated. Without a SEVIS record, students are unable to finish

their courses and are required to return home. Ultimately, universities could lose their SEVP certified status if they fail to meet the demands of SEVIS.

During my visit I was advised that while the database was now working well, SEVIS had been an extremely complicated IT system to introduce, with numerous technical difficulties. Once the system was up and running, the fact that data had to be transmitted on a regular basis had proved time-consuming to OIS staff. It had been costly and time-consuming for the OIS to enter all of the student data into the system and develop applications that could handle the new data needs. Initially, there had been some difficulties with students not being granted entry to the US because of issues relating to SEVIS or because information had been entered erroneously.

It was clear that the OIS at both universities saw close links with international students and their departments, their course tutors and academic advisers as a way to track students and keep up to date on their status. In this way they were able to maintain accurate records and manage their workload and attempting to avoid fire-fighting issues as they arose.

### **Reflections**

At the University of Surrey we have a low number of international students who withdraw from their courses, only 6.7%. Through our meet-and-greet, orientation and other events organised through the year we establish close links with our international students. It is unclear at this stage how the new UK Border Agency and Home Office regulations will impact on our working routine and workload in the International Student Office. It may however have a significant impact.

From my visit to North Carolina State and Maryland Universities, I believe we could learn from the proactive approach of their OIS's in terms of the range of activities they organise for international students and the efforts they put in to building and maintaining links with other academic advisers, departments and faculties. Monitoring of students will improve by being proactive and by building closer relationships with students and departments.

The benefits are even happier and more successful students, a reduced number of 'reportable events', such as withdrawals, that need to go to the immigration departments and as a result a more manageable workload.