

## **On-course support for study abroad students, welcome programmes, credit transfer and service learning schemes supporting student mobility in the USA**

*by Susan Isherwood, International Projects Manager, Leeds Metropolitan University*

### **Destination of the visit**

The visit was designed around a strategic partnership which has been established in the USA, with Nazareth College in Rochester, New York State. This partnership started as a traditional student exchange agreement and has developed to also include academic exchange, knowledge transfer and service learning student “volunteering”. Our local airport, Leeds Bradford International Airport, is considering introducing direct flights to New York making incoming and outgoing student mobility to this region much easier and more attractive.

I visited other higher education providers to extend our range of contacts in Rochester to compare and contrast their different approaches to student support, etc. The institutions visited were: University of Rochester; Nazareth College; Brockport College SUNY; Rochester Institute of Technology. I also visited one of our other exchange partners, Ramapo College in New Jersey. This provided a rich source of comparative information to draw on.

### **Objectives of the visit**

Building on the findings of a project group reviewing the experience of international students at our university, the overall purpose of the visit was to learn from best practice in “student care” in the USA where it is recognised there is more expertise in meeting the special needs and expectations of students studying for short periods such as one semester. The visit was designed to enable us also to learn more about service learning and how this may become a greater part of our offer to students generally or as part of our study abroad package for US students. It was also the intention that this study will help us finalise a study and volunteering abroad offer for our UK students.

### **Summary of outcomes**

#### *Student support*

- there are very varied levels of support and different approaches; some levels of support are so high that student participants are felt not to be exposed to a sufficient level of challenge to enable personal skills development to take place
- we need to facilitate easier credit transfer and offer a more easily accessible range of modules consistently across the curriculum

#### *Service Learning*

- the visit has enabled us to finalise a community volunteer/summer school programme with partners in Rochester in 2011 with a view to a reciprocal visit in 2012

## **Background**

The background to this is a changing economic environment in which UK universities operate, and an associated change in policy emphasis towards the need to ensure greater revenue generation from all aspects of our international work; in this context by making the most of opportunities with exchange partners to recruit US students on to short one or two semester full fee-paying study abroad programmes at the University. This is coupled with the requirement as part of the overall offer to ensure a consistently high level of student satisfaction expressed through feedback surveys.

A second element is the need to ensure all students have appropriate preparation for working life on completion of their studies; that they have had ample opportunity to develop key skills as part of their experience. It is understood that in the United States this is provided to a greater extent than the UK through volunteering/service learning opportunities within the curriculum and through the informal curriculum.

## **Key findings**

### *Student support*

Firstly, the level of hospitality offered to visitors in the US is very different to that in the UK where it is not the norm to offer, for example, to collect visitors on arrival or to invite them to our own homes. These cultural differences can make the UK institutions seem much less welcoming and supportive to US students as their expectations of the warmth of welcome may not be met. Welcome arrangements are identified in international student surveys such as the International Student Barometer as being a key element in ensuring students settle in to their studies and adapt to culture shock.

It is common practice in the US for students to consult faculty advisors on module selection to build a course from a programme of modules; they also consult these advisors when choosing modules overseas and need easy access to coherent module descriptions. In some universities these are referred to Academic Advisement Centres or College Centre for Academic Support.

Many US students choose to study at US colleges with campuses in the UK, such as Arcadia University. This route ensures easy credit transfer, security and a similar level of support to that they are used to in their home institutions. This is a stress-free way to study abroad with a group of other Americans yet experiencing other countries.

Most US universities have an International Services Office who provide support to international students with regard to visas and immigration matters as well as assisting students in adjusting to the US, the university and the community. At the University of Rochester the International Services Office is responsible for the following services:

- immigration advice
- cross-cultural counselling
- student & scholar advocacy (liaising with University departments and community representatives to advocate for and address the needs of international students and scholars).
- educational, cultural, and social programming
  - International Student Orientation Program (<http://www.iso.rochester.edu/Incoming/orientation.html>)
  - Rochester International Council (<http://www.rifc.org/>)
  - workshops & presentations on topics such as immigration, employment, taxes, Social Security Number application procedures, buying a car
  - staff development on cross-cultural communication
  - dependant orientation for spouses and children
  - trips & social programmes
  - English conversation group

The majority of the above are very similar to the services offered at UK intuitions; however Rochester International Council (RIC) is particularly noteworthy. This is an organisation for all in Rochester including students from all universities and colleges and the local community through the following services:

- volunteer Friendship Hosts - volunteers from the community are matched with international students to offer practical help and social contacts
- Global Perspectives speakers – this programme is designed to bring international and American school students together, through presentations and discussions, which address misconceptions and highlight similarities as well as differences among cultures
- International Wives – meetings and outings organised to provide social interaction for wives of international students in Rochester.
- RIC events - events are organised to encourage international students to engage with the local community and with one another; these include picnics, dances, traditional Thanksgiving dinners, wine tasting, museum visits and much more.

This not-for-profit organisation was founded in 1948 and is an excellent example of the community working with the universities to promote understanding and provide support to international student visitors to their city. It is funded through the community members and fundraising activities.

At Nazareth College the International Services Office supports most international students but those coming into the College through study abroad and exchange schemes administered by the Centre for International Education (CIE) are supported by these staff rather than the International Services Office. A very great level of care is offered: students are all given their roommates' information in advance of arrival; all students are collected from the airport and helped to move into their accommodation; all students are given the mobile phone numbers of staff; a welcome reception at the home of the Director is organised; excursions and events are organised. The Academic Advisement Centre helps students to choose their classes and timetables. All students live on campus and it is

therefore a very protected environment for them, one that would be difficult to recreate at our much larger institution.

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) has introduced an innovative scheme within its campus accommodation to encourage study abroad and to support incoming international students. RIT has established a Global Village on campus to internationalise the campus. This provides a global environment for students as they prepare to enter the global community, travel overseas and join a culturally diverse workforce. The Study Abroad and Global Campus Offices are located within the Global Village, together with internationalised shops and restaurants. The International House in the Global Village provides residential accommodation for students planning on studying or taking a work placement abroad, students returning from studying or placements abroad and incoming international students. This arrangement provides a supportive environment for the new international students from US students who already have a global perspective and an interest in other cultures and at the same time the new international students are able to share their experience and knowledge to help prepare the other students for an experience abroad.

### *Service Learning*

Following the visit we have been able to agree a community volunteer/summer school programme with partners in Rochester in 2011 with a view to a reciprocal visit in 2012. Ten Leeds Metropolitan student volunteers will work mainly with the Community Place of Rochester City (a well established community centre) and activities will be mainly with children. Volunteers will stay in student accommodation at Nazareth College and will experience social and cultural activities in addition to the volunteer work. The students will also receive tuition in the purpose and background of the Nazareth/Community place link, and through this be introduced to the concept of service learning. They will undertake a reflective practice assignment and be encouraged to learn how the experience enhances their life skills and employability. It is intended that where possible this experience will form part of the students' formal learning programme. We expect to recruit students from across the curriculum with particular interest from Teacher Education, Youth and Community and Playwork students.

### **Recommendations for Leeds Met**

We need to review our communications with international students to enable us to offer a culturally sensitive and appropriate welcome and meet expectations.

If we are to extend our exchange, study abroad and summer school offerings for US students and enhance the experience of the short course students that we already attract, publishing better and up-to-date module descriptions for courses available, detailing the content, credits and semester that it is offered is key. Without these, students are unable to get approval for credit transfer from their home institution. Advice and support from subject specialists to identify a suitable, viable and more coherent selection of modules needs to improve.

Building on existing experience, offering a sustainable community volunteer/summer school programme with partners in Rochester is a practical proposition. We need to learn from our

students' experience this summer and further extend service learning/volunteering/summer school by linking with other partner institutions in the USA.

### **Learning points for other UK institutions**

We can learn from the USA to work more closely with local universities and community organisations to provide engagement, cultural enrichment, friendship and support to international students.

The concept of service learning needs to be better understood across the sector in the UK. Through service learning US students are able to gain valuable experience and develop new perspectives outside of the educational environment working on community participation projects. The value of this is felt not just within the communities served but importantly supports students' skills development which with appropriate support and reflection may be transferred to new contexts. A good service learning experience can enhance communication and employability skills and enhance intercultural understanding and capability

### **National policy issues raised**

Encourage the development of different types of collaboration between UK universities and their USA partners to include community initiatives and to provide service learning opportunities which encourage social responsibility, support the development of life skills and employability and the Big Society agenda.

### **Issues for the future**

In order to grow a sustainable study abroad offer attractive to US students it will be important to become much more customer centred to understand and meet students' expectations as consumers, taking all reasonable steps to offer suitable arrangements that ensure an appropriate level of comfort and safety.

In a harsh economic environment the development of volunteering and service learning will need to offer clear benefits to students in terms of enhancing employability and supporting their formal learning.