

# The involvement and development of international students within volunteer programmes

(Boston University, University of Massachusetts, Northeastern University, Harvard and MIT)

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## Introduction

In March 2008 I visited five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Boston with the support of the Prime Ministers Initiative grant programme.

The objective of the visit was to look at the involvement and development of international students within volunteer programmes at the institutions, their accreditation, and their role in the enhancement of the overall student experience. The visit also focused on the development of a volunteer exchange programme between USA institutions and UK HEIs and the possible development of joint international volunteering projects in the developing world.

In November 2006, the General Manager of the University of Plymouth Students' Union (UPSU) attended a conference in Boston and took in a tour of a number of institutions in the Boston area. During these visits it was noted how much the programmes were linked to the student experience and how much the international students at each institution engaged with them. This is something which is going to be fundamental to the development of the UK experience if competitiveness with other countries is to be improved.

During the ten-day visit, meetings were held with the following representatives from the following five HEIs:

- Director of the Student Activities Centre at Boston University
- Assistant Dean and Director of the Public Service Centre at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
- Senior Assistant to the Vice Chancellor for Athletics, Recreation, Special Projects and Programs at the University of Massachusetts
- Director of the Student Activity

Centre at Northeastern University  
– Manager of Phillips Brooks House Association, Harvard University

The student population the five HEIs varied greatly – from 6,000 at Harvard to 13,000 at the University of Massachusetts. The student demographics and the number of international students taking part in community service opportunities also varied greatly, as can be seen in the Key Findings Section.

## Outcomes

The PMI study visit to five HEIs in Boston showed the importance and commitment of the universities to community engagement, the enhancement of student experience and the personal development of students. Volunteering and community action is extremely popular in Boston, and this has been related to the fact that many have previously taken part in community volunteering from an early age via faith-based activities for example, or through their schooling.

Investment is a major key to the success of many of their programmes. Investment not just by the university but through national policies, and the government, and investment that is long term, committed and focused on the sustainability of volunteering and community service departments. Funding for UK HEIs from the current The Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) is only committed currently until the end of 2009 and has been delivered in three-year rounds until now. The uncertainty of UK funding does not make long-term planning and the expansion of successful volunteering activities in UK HEIs an easy task, as workers are always aware that their funding stream is time

limited.

Each of the five HEIs has considerable investment from their university as well as a commitment for this to increase and for community engagement to be a major part of their mission statements as education providers.

Feedback from the five HEIs showed international students to be self-motivated and engage at high levels with volunteering. This is partly due to the length of their studies in Boston – their need to meet people, the fact that they cannot undertake paid work in the USA, and also due to the week-long pre-course activities prior to starting their academic studies.

## Key findings

### International students

The study highlighted several key points regarding international students and their engagement with community volunteering projects. It became clear that at the five HEIs visited, engaging international students was relatively easy and highly successful as many students are on exchange programmes for one, two or three terms and as such often look to be involved in extra curricula activities as a way to make friends and learn about the city they live in.

International students are unable to work in the USA and so volunteering is one way of gaining valuable experience, accessing training programmes and meeting both students and the community.

Student tuition fees are high in the USA and international students can pay £25,000 a year to attend university. After meeting with the HEIs many felt that due to the high cost of education international students are keen to maximise their experience and want

to get involved with community volunteering projects right from the start.

UMass was the only public university visited and had the greatest diversity of students studying at their campuses. 13,000 students study a range of part-time, two-year, and full-time four-year courses; the average student age is 27 and there is no campus-based accommodation. The average travel time to campus is 45 minutes; many students are the first of their family to attend an HEI; are from blue collar families; have families to care for, are international students, and have to undertake paid work to support their studies. In 2007 there were nearly 2,000 war veterans undertaking courses at UMass campuses and the number of refugees applying to attend was increasing.

As a result of the demographics at UMass, the Community Service Office targets international students for volunteering activities as they are unable to undertake paid work. All other community projects and volunteering projects are linked to student's studies and they receive course credits or are part of Service Learning programmes that provide grants and financial aid to those taking part in volunteering activities. Further details of some of the Service Learning programmes are highlighted later in this report.

### **'Pre-Orientation Weeks'**

All five HEIs operate 'pre-orientation weeks' prior to the start of the academic year. These weeks offer a range of activities, talks and trips around the city in order for new students to orientate themselves with their new surroundings. The weeks are booked up to a year in advance in some cases and the number of students wanting to take part increases each year. According to the feedback gained from the meetings, the pre-orientation weeks are very popular with international students as it is seen as a way to make friends, move into their accommodation early and take part in volunteering activities. The International Offices at the HEIs are integral in the planning of the weeks and work with the students and staff that run the projects in order to make sure the support systems are in place and the correct information is provided.

Every year Harvard University runs a First Year Urban Programme for 100 students who apply and pay for the course one year in advance. Students are provided with a pre-course reading package prior to the week for

discussion sessions in the evenings. Subject matter in 2007 included racism, issues affecting international students, what volunteering means and how community engagement benefits everyone. 40% of those taking part in the Pre-orientation week at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2007 were international students, with 8% of those being graduates.

The First-Year Student Outreach Project (FYSOP) offers incoming Boston University students an opportunity to get settled in their new community by performing a week of volunteering activities before the academic year begins. FYSOP volunteers participate in introduction sessions, a day of education, and three days of volunteering projects and activities in areas of their choice. In 2007 the FYSOP volunteers completed over 13,000 hours of service in the Greater Boston Area. These hours have an immediate impact on the community and give volunteers the opportunity to learn and create new friendships through service.

### **Accreditation and Grant Programmes**

The student demographics at UMass has led to faculty-wide accreditation of volunteering activity as this enables students who want to undertake such work but have many other commitments on their university time, to do so. UMass was the only HEI visited that had formal accreditation systems in place.

A report commissioned by UMass in 2006 showed that there were 225 formal accredited courses that included Service Learning and Community Based Learning modules. 2,485 students participated in those modules which equates to 20.7% of the total number of students at UMass. Students take part in community service as part of credit-bearing courses – credits are not awarded for the volunteering activity alone but for the reflection and written papers on their learning experience. This accreditation on a range and variety of courses enables international students, who are unable to undertake paid work, to gain valuable experience and skills.

UMass is proud to be seen as the 'Urban University' and community engagement at all levels is a priority of their mission statement and aims, and the executive leadership are hugely supportive of this and are driven to take community engagement further.

All of the HEIs have an extensive programme of grants and schemes available for students to apply, which

range from one-off project funding for student-led projects to schemes where students can supplement their current volunteering with paid research or mentoring roles within the community. It was clear from the meetings that all the Public Service and Volunteering Departments have an enormous amount of financial support from their universities and this enables them to tailor grants and funding to their student demographics. Alumni also play a huge role at Harvard and MIT in financially supporting the funding programme. A snapshot of the grants and project funding is highlighted below.

### **Stride Rite Community Scholars Programme**

The Stride Rite Programme is available to students at four of the five HEIs visited. At Northeastern university it is a joint venture between the University, the Stride Rite Foundation and five community groups. The project is designed to offer intensive full-time volunteering experience to students who cannot afford to volunteer, and cover tuition fees and university costs, apply their skills and interests to their local community. The Stride Rite Community Scholars' mission is to support student community action, by making it possible for diverse students of all backgrounds to take leadership roles in community organisations, and by providing training in leadership development and public service skills.

At Northeastern University, Stride Rite Scholars perform 35 hours of volunteering a week for the duration of their six month placement. Community Scholars are paid weekly from an allowance of \$7,200 for the six months of their volunteering activities. Student participants may continue their service after the completion of their commitment to the programme as a volunteer.

### **Student Civic Engagement Grants**

The Student Civic Engagement Grant project at Northeastern University started in 2005 in order to support student-led community projects and activities. Grants of up to \$500 are awarded twice a year to students, or student groups, who can show that their project/activity has real benefit to the local community and raises the level of partnership working with the University, and highlights the issues faced by community groups.

### **Service Learning**

Service Learning at UMass gives

students the opportunity to link community engagement with academic studies. Projects can be part of one of the student's current courses or an independent study or research project. All projects are approved by Academic Departments or course instructors and students receive a \$1,000 Scholarship Award after completing 300 hours of project-linked volunteering.

The Public Service Centre at MIT operates very differently to all the other HEIs visited. They encourage students to seek out their own volunteering activities and to think about how they can use their studies, learning and skills to help solve problems faced by both the local and global community. MIT has some of the brightest minds studying at their campus and have developed a range of grants to support innovative ideas and projects. The annual IDEAS Competition encourages teams to develop and implement projects that make a positive change and address the needs of an under-served community. Six teams are awarded up to \$7,500 to then turn their idea into reality. Previous winners have included a low-cost battery-powered microfilm projector for use in Mali.

On a more local scale MIT students can apply for Public Service Centre Grants to support local art projects, tutoring projects and teaching activities. The main criteria for all the MIT grants and projects are that they must be sustainable and they must be community driven.

### **Campus Compact**

The Campus Compact was formed in 1985 to encourage students to become active citizens who work with their community to make it a better place to live and work. There are now over 1,100 members including public and private universities and colleges, rural and urban HEIs and those offering a range of courses from part-time to the full time four-year options. The Compact has a national office and 33 state offices that co-ordinate the local HEIs and help to disseminate good practice to the entire membership.

The Compact works to develop a co-ordinated approach to community programmes, through research, policy development, training to both workers and student volunteers, and provides national advocacy and leadership training to all student volunteers in order to develop the socially responsible leaders of the future. The Compact also raises funds to support campus-based community outreach work and provides professional development for

all staff and administrators.

On a local scale, such as the Massachusetts Compact, it has enabled the workers at Boston HEIs to share good practice, and access funding for Volunteers in Service to America (VISTAs) and projects that do not duplicate work and research being carried out in neighbouring HEIs. They have been given the opportunity to attend other institutes to experience other community service centres and workshops designed to improve community-based teaching, learning, and research.

Campus Compact Volunteers in Service to America (VISTAs) spend one year working at a campus that is a member of the Campus Compact and work on projects that enhance community engagement and partnership working. The programmes are monitored and administered by the state Campus Compact and the host site supervises and supports the VISTA throughout the year. Training for the VISTA is also organised and delivered by the state Campus Compact. Projects completed by VISTAs have included the developing of student leadership courses, co-ordinating volunteer placements with local community groups, creating publicity for volunteers and community agencies, and the mentoring of student volunteers.

Every Campus Compact VISTA who completes a year of service receives:

- a post-service Education Award of \$4,725 to pay for college tuition or student loans or an allowance of \$1,200
- monthly subsistence living allowance
- health insurance
- student loan forbearance
- relocation allowance
- non-competitive eligibility for federal employment in the year following service
- housing and meal plans are available at some campuses

The VISTA programme is an excellent model of a nationally organised project that offers hands-on experience for graduate students wishing to gain skills in project management in the community engagement and student volunteering field. The management structure provides excellent support for workers in the universities and this in turn enables them to give the required input and support required by the VISTA whilst still balancing the work of a busy volunteering department.

### **Alternative Spring Breaks**

Each year, hundreds of students spend an Alternative Spring Break volunteering through the five HEIs' Alternative Spring Breaks programme. The goal of ASB is to provide the student body with a unique volunteering activity and the opportunity for students to organise and participate in community service trips during the Autumn and Spring breaks.

ASB trips promote community service, develop leadership skills, and create strong bonds amongst the student volunteers. The trips allow students to visit other parts of the country and learn about various social issues first-hand. The ASB project helps students improve their environment whilst learning valuable transferable skills.

On average the five HEIs visited offered 15 ASB projects during the Autumn and Spring holidays, and are always over-subscribed. Students complete an application process and are interviewed prior to being accepted. Volunteers can choose from a variety of trips, each with a different focus. Some trips are environmentally based, while others work with children, people with disabilities, the homeless, refugees, or those affected by natural disasters. Volunteers stay in a variety of accommodation, including campsites, churches and community centres.

The fee for the Alternative Spring Breaks at Boston University in 2007 was \$275, with between 10 and 15 student volunteers on each trip. This covered food, housing, and transportation for the week. Two student co-ordinators who have been responsible for the organising and developing the project, and a paid staff chaperone also accompany each trip.

### **Next steps**

After meeting with the five HEIs all agreed that they would be very interested in further conversations about possible exchange programmes between the University of Plymouth, or other UK universities. The exchange could take the format of 10-15 students from America visiting Plymouth and gain experience of community action initiatives in the UK, followed by the American HEIs hosting a group of UK students the next academic year. This process could then lead on to joint international volunteer projects in the developing world once more substantial links are made between the universities. It was agreed that I would compile a short proposal and circulate it to the group.

### **Future Study Visits**

A key theme that became apparent from the visits to the five HEIs was their involvement with the Campus Compact scheme and the benefits gained from the organisation. The Compact now represents more than a quarter of all of the American HEIs and is a powerful tool in the development of community action.

In the UK, organisations such as Student Volunteering England provide a national forum and information for workers in student community volunteering, and new initiatives such as 'V' promote involvement in volunteering by young people. Further study of the Campus Compact and how

areas of its work can be implemented or used in the UK would be beneficial. The study could look at the funding of a national VISTA style programme and how to set up regional networks for workers.

The Pre-Orientation Week projects are also another area of further study as these attract a high number of international volunteers and provide a solid introduction to university life and community engagement. Research has shown that the activities have assisted with the reduction of drop-out rates – they are highest within the first four weeks of the start of the year, often because of feelings of homesickness or loneliness. The Pre-Orientation scheme

aims to encourage students to interact and make new friends from the start of their time at university.