

**Preaching to the converted?  
Developing international awareness through student volunteering,  
community engagement and employability.**

Abstract

Queen Margaret University (QMU) recently relocated to Musselburgh, a small town on the outskirts of Edinburgh. A number of initiatives had been put in place to engage local residents, but most of these had focused on the facilities and opportunities for learning rather than liaison with the students themselves.

Feedback from international students across the UK highlights that many find it difficult to make friends and contacts within the local community. Addressing this issue had become a pressing need, in order to enhance the experience of QMU's international students.

Parallel to this, the Students' Union had initiated a drive to encourage international students to volunteer, though their newly-launched Volunteer Recognition Programme so a joint bid to the PMI fund was considered as a way forward to work together to promote both sets of objectives and a successful bid was achieved in June 2008 for a project entitled, "Adopt an International Student".

The project was led by the Employability Coordinator and International Officer with support from the Students' Union, with a Project Officer being appointed on a 1-day per week basis for an initial period of 16 weeks, though this was later extended to 28 weeks.

The first stage of recruiting students for the project proved quite difficult. However, a small, but committed number of students emerged as a core group to take the project forward. Participants came from a wide geographical spread of countries and almost all of them were Masters level, in particular from the School of Health Sciences.

Students were given the choice of three projects but could contribute to one or all in any capacity. The projects ranged from:

- a tea party for elderly residents hosted in the Students' Union, sponsored by a local entrepreneur
- local primary schools visiting the campus and learning about the students' home countries with follow-up visits to their schools
- a clean-up at a local National Trust property

The projects ran from December 08 to March 09 and a number of key issues have emerged:

- The students involved had all previously engaged in volunteering activities and were looking for ways in which they could help local communities
- The benefits accruing to the university have been significant in terms of PR, the perception of the university and its students, and the opening up of the campus to local people.

- The international students have benefited by being able to learn more about Scotland and Scottish life (one student commenting that they were going home with an authentic picture of Scotland not a tourist image), and have further developed skills and attributes such as confidence, project planning and team work.
- A community of students was created who did not know each other, even if on the same course.
- The external organisations have all have expressed interest in continuing the link with the university and want to return to the campus or seek ways of getting QMU students more involved in their work.
- In addition the project has shown how multiple strategic objectives can be brought together i.e. community engagement, employability, widening participation and internationalisation when dedicated time and resources are made available.

Issues for the future centre on:

- the sustainability of these projects
- how students' contributions can be recognised whether through formal or informal mechanisms
- how students can be encouraged to use existing resources to develop their personal development planning
- how to recruit students who do not have previous volunteering experience