

Session 8: Workshop 4

Title: CUSAC: A New Force for Student Mobility

Presenter: Dr John Kirkland, Director of Human Capacity Development, ACU

Chair: Professor Frederick Kayanja, Vice-Chancellor, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Uganda

Rapporteur: Tamatha Webster, ACU

Presentation

In his presentation, Dr Kirkland outlined both the core concepts governing the formation and continuance of the Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium and some of the major recent developments and activities.

What is CUSAC?

- CUSAC was established by the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1993 and passed to the ACU in 1999.
- Its membership has doubled within the past year and now comprises 78 individual member universities who are keen to generate new international exchange opportunities.
- It functions under the principle that with an increased demand for international study, which conventional scholarships alone cannot satisfy, there is a need for students and universities to help themselves.
- It offers a networking and contact service that allows for the sharing of experience between members (e.g. the new 'CUSAC Up-date' newsletter, the electronic discussion forum and the recent CUSAC 2000 Halifax Conference). Additionally the CUSAC Secretariat is able to offer advice e.g. how to set up standard agreements governing an exchange; and, in keeping with the CUSAC principles of encouraging mutual fee waivers between institutions, these standard agreements address the provision of accommodation and welfare, thereby helping to keep the cost of the exchange to a minimum.

Bursary Fund

John Kirkland then outlined the provision of a bursary fund supplied via a £300,000 donation from the ACU. The bursaries were offered for the first time in 2000 for undergraduate students travelling from the 'South' for between 3 months and a year's duration. The money offered as a bursary covered a return airfare plus £500 per student. He advised that these bursaries would be available again in 2001 but warned session participants against joining CUSAC simply to access these bursaries as the axiom of CUSAC is that it is a self-help organisation and members therefore need to be committed to these principles.

He concluded by describing a new planned incentive for the CUSAC scheme: the development of exchanges containing work experience components. He described how at this stage it was limited to an agreement between Canada and the UK but added that future aspirations for the scheme would be to open this up to a wider range of Commonwealth countries. (As yet these plans are hindered by current laws governing immigration).

Discussion Points

The points raised during the remainder of the working session can be grouped within the following categories:

CUSAC bursary eligibility

- In addressing the issue of whether postgraduate students would be eligible to apply for CUSAC bursaries in the future John noted that studying abroad for such a short period of time would not fit easily within a Master's programme timetable. He further emphasised that this bursary is primarily set up to aid those who would not normally have the opportunity to travel as part of their studies. He stressed, however, that bursaries form a very small part of what CUSAC actually does and that universities are free to set up agreements between themselves to cater for postgraduate students.
- The point was made that it might be important for CUSAC to consider postgraduate bursaries in the future as the 'South' has problems with their taught Master's programmes. John agreed but indicated the possibility that CUSAC might not be the most appropriate vehicle for them.

Definitions/types of exchange students

- Asked to define how the line can be drawn between the experience of an exchange student and that of an international student, John explained that CUSAC students will all gain a qualification from their home institution. He added, however, that it was important for each institution to consider carefully the merits of the scheme in its own context.
- It was noted that one of the criticisms of EU exchange schemes is that travel is always one-sided and that it was possible CUSAC could face similar criticisms. John felt that although some travel would invariably be one way it is better, as CUSAC aims to address student mobility *per se*, to have unbalanced exchanges than none at all. He also stressed that with a starting point for contact it is more likely that a reciprocal arrangement could be co-ordinated.
- In response to the challenge that awards such as these might further the 'brain-drain' from developing countries, John opined that CUSAC exchanges do not actually encourage 'brain-drain' as the students' degrees are still awarded by their home institutions - to which, of course, they have to return.

Work experience exchanges

- The possibility was raised of ACU's acting as a network for work experience exchanges between institutions, thereby allowing students to travel amongst all member countries. While this would be a laudable long-term aspiration, there are, as mentioned above, so many varying immigration regulations regarding whether or not students will earn money during the exchange that operating such a wide-ranging scheme would be a very difficult task.

Mechanics of exchanges

- John was also asked how compatibility can be ensured between the work that students who travel abroad complete and those who remain at home. Again, John stressed that institutions themselves need to discuss whether there can be an equitable transfer of credit for students.

Request for a survey

The session concluded with a call for reflection on the progress of the scheme overall, on the numbers who have benefited from it, and on the experiences and problems that have been encountered. It was agreed that much could be learned and shared from a survey of all students who have travelled so far.