

# **HUMANE**

## **Heads of University Management & Administration Network in Europe**

### **Seminar**

#### ***“Student Issues”***

**Universite de Haute Bretagne, Rennes II**

**22-23 September 2000**

The President of the University, Professor Jean Brihault, welcomed participants to Rennes. He prefaced his comments on the provision of student services by emphasising the long-standing centralisation of the French education system. Despite recent changes universities still remained in a centralised and in many ways a reactive situation. Another long tradition was that of wide availability of HE at low cost, with tuition fees of about 150 euros.

The provision of student services such as accommodation and food was moreover not the direct responsibility of the university, but of a central regional body (the CROUS). Students with health problems have to go to local doctors, not a university health service – and with the increasingly varied social backgrounds of students this issue is becoming more visible. The university does have a careers service, and is also responsible for sport and culture, as well as student mobility.

One feature which provoked comment and discussion was that of student involvement in the regular meetings of senior management. Professor Brihault had found this to be an inspiring and fruitful contribution – he had stressed to each new student vice-president the need for responsibility and confidentiality, and this confidence had always been respected. For some participants this was a rather new concept while for others such as those from Spain the fact of large student representation on university boards was totally normal. Professor Brihault outlined the ways in which, during the 1990s, universities had been encouraged to enter into partnerships with local or regional authorities [the success of this type of activity in Rennes was highlighted by a formal reception and dinner at the Town Hall later in the day], and with economic networks.

He considered that Rennes II was successful in terms of cultural and artistic activity, but less so in the field of sport. He was trying to develop this. He agreed with the suggestion that universities could usefully enter into partnerships with local sporting clubs, for shared use of facilities. It was felt that despite possible conflicts of interest (and even local resistance such as had been experienced by one member) this was an overall benefit. The university had even introduced a scheme whereby outstanding sportspeople would receive special help to catch up with classes which had been missed as a result of absence related to their sporting activity.

A visit to Rennes' twinned city of Cork (IE) had illustrated the success of residences for international students, and he was trying to encourage the growth of a social centre which would allow students to see the university as a home rather than as a place to be visited for classes. He had seen and admired the "Student Union" concept of other countries. Rennes II had an active programme of making local people more familiar with the campus, especially since the local population included many families with no experience of university life.

In response to questions about the links with national legislation the President outlined the nature of the four-year "contract" which allowed the university to put forward plans for Ministry approval. This positive development was matched, however, by the negative feature whereby all financial decisions had to be checked and approved by the *agent comptable* in terms of formal Ministry rules. The difficulty of using old and rigid rules to deal with new and evolving structures led to tensions. This view was supported by the university's *agent comptable* (and seminar organiser) with an illustration of how difficult it was to use funds if the case was not foreseen in the detailed rules of expenditure.

Other questions related to the nature of student participation. Professor Brihault was trying to involve students more in transport and security issues, and was developing a scheme whereby students were associated with local schools, helping both pupils and their own career prospects.

## **The Promotion of Graduate Employment: University Careers Services**

***Anna-Riita Piilonen, University of Helsinki (FI)***

Anna-Riita explained her position as head of the Careers Service. Traditionally, Finnish universities (with the exception of the schools of economics and universities of technology) had not paid much attention to their contacts with working life, since the need had not been obvious. But at the beginning of the 1990s, when the recession and growing unemployment were having a dramatic effect on the employment prospects of graduates, the Finnish Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour realised the urgent need for measures promoting graduate employment. Universities were given labour policy-related duties and this led to the development of career services. These services are nowadays available for all students in every university in Finland, and work as an active national network.

At the University of Helsinki, the Career Services Centre was established in 1994 with government project funding. It has an important role to play in connections between university and society, between education and working life, not least in times of better employment trends (as it is in these days). The tasks of the Centre are:

1. Monitoring changes on the borderline of education and the labour market.
2. Strengthening the role and quality of traineeship periods during studies.
3. Making better use of employer connections in teaching and in preparing master's theses.
4. Developing students' orientation and knowledge of working life besides the academic facilities.

The working environment of the universities in Finland had changed remarkably in the 1990s with polytechnics appearing on the educational market. The polytechnics now develop their teaching, but taking the needs of working life as the starting point. This trend is accompanied by effective marketing and close partnership contacts with the business world.

Anna-Piila concluded by noting that despite these new circumstances the University of Helsinki did not intend to give up the tradition of educating academic generalists, whose best quality is the ability to acquire, analyse and implement knowledge in changing duties and environments. However, it had to be recognised that the multi-faceted labour market requires new qualities and readiness for marketing the academic skills both on individual and university levels.

*The next two sessions dealt with the organisation of student services for international students. Both speakers dealt essentially with ways in which needed to make their (small) town an attractive place for potential students.*

## **Housing Facilities for Exchange Students**

### ***Ger Weening, University of Groningen (NL)***

Ger Weening explained the international aspirations of Groningen in the context of situation where 75% of students came from the northern part of the Netherlands and the university needed to compete even more keenly with others for the remaining 25%. The University of Groningen considered good housing facilities for our exchange students to be a prerequisite for a successful stay. Such visits were considered successful if the exchange student had adequate accommodation that enables him/her to come into an intensive contact not only with Dutch culture and Dutch students but also with exchange students from other countries. It had therefore developed a rather unique concept of international student houses and an active, informative and integrated support of Dutch student-organisations.

The presentation focused on

- the University of Groningen, its surroundings and co-operation with other HEIs
- the pioneer phase in housing exchange students
- the professionalisation and office systems used to deal with the housing
- basis philosophies on optimising social and inter-cultural contact
- the exit interviews which are carried out to see how well exchange students appreciate the facilities on offer, and which give the opportunity to improve efforts, if necessary.

Ger noted that exchange students came to Groningen for between three and twelve months, and – because of non-consecutive bookings and periods of study – this could lead to logistical problems. It was impossible to know exact numbers of rooms in advance, while housing that was not occupied clearly costs money. Here too there was joint activity in that the university and the local Hochschule had been able to share resources in certain activities by (for example) creating a single co-ordinator.

One such feature was the use of a Dutch student as a warden in each international residence – it had proved a popular way of creating a sense of identity in the Netherlands, and at the small cost of a moderate fee had greatly increased satisfaction rates. Another point which had emerged from comparative evaluations was that foreign students much preferred single rooms to the shared rooms which were more typical in the Netherlands. The internal debate at Groningen about the wisdom of having residences totally reserved for foreign students (as opposed to a mix) was continued in the seminar as participants debated the plus and minus points of segregation. The clear consensus was that one should avoid a ghetto effect and also ensure that incoming students benefited wherever possible from some contact with their host country. Participants were extremely interested in the relative results of the surveys which had compared the various residences.

### **Services for international students**

#### ***Johann Peter Schäfer, University of Siegen (DE)***

Johann Peter outlined the special factors which applied to the treatment of international students at the University of Siegen. As a rather provincial town with about 115,000 inhabitants, Siegen is not a university town that easily attracts such students, and so it was necessary to work hard to be competitive and to improve the quality of student services. It was now an important aspect of recruitment, although German universities had been quite reluctant for decades to look at the international education market and campaign for good students – such as in the UK or USA.

First, since the German language was seen as a major barrier for all of those who consider studying abroad, the university offers free German language training to our future students. The International Office's German Language Programme consists of beginners' and advanced courses. Students can learn the language in courses with 20 hours per week right through from beginners' level. For the current semester there had been more than 1,000 applications for about 60 students. An extension of the courses was planned, to offer more students a chance of admission – but this was a major investment.

Taking care of foreign students at the university depends partly on the length of their stay. Long-term care applies to those students, who, having successfully completed the German language examination, take up their studies and wish to complete their degree in Siegen, and, secondly, newly enrolled students from other universities. Short-term care applies to those students who, for example within the SOCRATES framework, stay in Siegen for 1 or 2 semesters. The main agency involved here is the International Students Office (Akademisches Auslandsamt). Short-term care involves initial contact with foreign students (mostly by letter, or e-mail), sending an information package about entry, study, the university, the city and the region, together with other brochures with detailed information about student life, arranging accommodation, and tutors. University agencies help foreign students to make contact with their tutors and assist in completing formalities including registration with a health insurance scheme and the local government authorities

Johann Peter outlined the official welcome is organised with senior staff, and various tours of the campus, the university library and the city, and a welcome party and visits to other cities. A full sporting programme is available, as is a Student Counselling Service. In addition to introductory seminars to simplify the entry into university (for example, notes on study technique) a special tutor helps international students to adjust to the German system of making notes in lectures, writing papers, participating in seminar discussions etc. Finally he was also pleased with new measures to keep contact after university are also in place, such as information exchanges and an alumni magazine – especially as this was rather a new development in Germany.

In discussion of this presentation and that of Ger Weening there was discussion of the merits and demerits of charging deposits for accommodation and the imposition of penalties for cancellation. The general view was that it was wasteful to spend too much time chasing such payment – at Siegen foreign students were treated exactly the same as German students, with a deposit (returnable depending on the state of the room) and a possible refund of any early payment depending on the reason for cancellation.

*Two presentations from Sweden and Spain then considered aspects of market competition when developing services.*

### **Student Services and Increased Competition**

*Jan Erik Ogren, Umeå University (SE)*

This presentation concentrated on the need for further development of student services in the light of increased competition between universities. As in many other countries the number of HE students in Sweden had increased, from about 150,000 to 300,000 during the 1990s. The present goal is that 50% of an age group should go on to HE. The increase is especially high within science and technology. A decrease in the number of available students has led to a situation of increased competition between universities. This has among other things led to increased marketing, with rather standard responses based on better brochures or mass publicity. But Jan Erik argued that this was not enough – the product which was being marketed (the courses, the student service etc) must be excellent.

The school system in Sweden had undergone several reforms. One result is that students do not have the same prerequisites as before. This had been dealt with in different ways, and various examples were given to illustrate this, such as the “college year” in which there was joint provision of course in secondary school and university. Another type of joint provision was seen in the induction programme for new students, organised jointly by the university and the Students Union. Meanwhile, an integrated “one-stop shop” had been introduced for the provision of services, and Jan-Erik was entirely convinced of the need to see students not just as customers but as participative members of the university community. He argued that it was important to receive the students in the best possible way to give them a good start and a good introduction to university life.

It was also of great importance to provide good student service in a broad sense during their time of study. One way to achieve that is to focus on student participation and student perspective. That involves all parts of the university, the leaders, the teaching staff, the administrative staff etc. One had to meet student expectation and find a balance between the challenge and the support for each individual student. It was also necessary to make the student a part of the planning and decision processes in the university – something which was now emphasised by the Swedish Parliament which has decided on changes in the university law.

## **A Re-formulation of Accommodation & Transport Policies**

### ***José Manuel Muñoz Muñoz, University Of Córdoba (ES)***

José Manuel introduced the city of Córdoba, located in the north of Andalusia, some 150 km from Seville, with 310,000 inhabitants, and the capital of a province with over 450,000 inhabitants. The region of Andalusia had nine universities, and students may apply to any of these nine universities. The University of Córdoba has 17,000 fte students in official courses, 940 postgraduates and 872 members of academic staff in 50 Departments. Geographically, the University buildings were mainly concentrated in the west of the town, but some spread out through the centre and beyond. Two Halls of Residence ("Colegios Mayores") housed 500 students, plus some other private halls of residence and flats to rent.

Against this background he described how the opportunity for modernisation had come with a government offer of a new campus 6 km. to the east of the town. This would allow buildings to correspond to the departmental structure, and would encourage the modernisation and growth of infrastructures such as laboratories and libraries. However, various groups - academic staff, students, and in the city itself – objected, for example, that there was no suitable public transport available to the new campus, and that accommodation (both, public & private) was too far away. The university's decision to go ahead with the new campus therefore meant having to have a new accommodation policy, with a new transport policy.

The starting point was seen to be inadequate accommodation. Schemes were adopted, including flats for rent. Since the university has no money to build new halls of residence on-campus the Government offered to provide 70 new flats under social protection rules, with very low prices and at "no cost" to the university. Agreement was reached between the Andalusian Government, a bank and the University to fund, finance and promote two buildings each providing room for over 250 students in or near the new campus - a public company would construct the buildings, to be owned by the University. The flats were finished in June 2000, but additional costs to the university have occurred, notably because of differences of criteria about quality standards - for example no air-conditioning was planned although Córdoba has temperatures of over 35<sup>0</sup> C five months a year, no furniture was supplied, and extra security facilities were required.

José Manuel described the difficulties of bringing in new rules and regulations of occupancy in such an arrangement, where University expectations and the demands of low-cost "social accommodation" are different. These disparities were probably a large factor in the low demand for the accommodation, and the university was urgently adapting facilities and working to change the rules for social accommodation.

The presentation also dealt with the transport policy, aimed at providing suitable transport to the campus (6 km. from the town) for over 9,000 people. Here the starting point was an extremely poor bus service, an absence of local support, and a railway line at the edge of the campus for long distance services only. The agreement (Andalusian Government, national railways and the University) was that the University would promote the construction of a station at the campus, the Government would provide the funding for it, and RENFE (Spanish railways) would establish the service in accordance with the time-table and prices set out by the University, and help to subsidise the deficit of the service.

The implementation was successful in that the station was ready in time (Oct 1996), with the number of trains increasing from then on. Now the train timetable determines to some extent that of the classes. The deficit (originally around 8.200 euro a month) is now negligible. It remains for us to increase the frequency and size of trains, and to promote further links with the possible result of bringing students from the south of the province to the University daily, instead of going to other universities.

Discussion took up the earlier theme of Professor Brihault, with thoughts about the ways in which one might bring life to the campus. It was suggested that merely to move the place of lectures and classes was not truly to create a new campus. Generally the situation in Cordoba illustrated the possibilities of collaboration with regional and municipal authorities, and there was good advice about the best means of proceeding – especially when such partners might have different political agendas or priorities. In this context the Université de Haute Bretagne illustrated very well dual priorities in that it would benefit from a new metro system linking the campus to the city centre, but also needed to keep in touch with and develop the interests of the traditionally uninvolved neighbourhood. Finally, the discussion explored the idea of how to provide student services in a multi-campus institution.

*The final two presentations described the experience of two UK universities and in fact they neatly illustrated a number of the points made by other speakers.*

### **Joining up Support Services – a Better Service for Students**

*Jon Baldwin, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UK)*

At the time of the seminar Jon had just moved from the university of Wolverhampton to UMIST, and his presentation was therefore based on both institutions but particularly on the former. In considering organisational models for support services for students he looked first at a number of problems associated with a fragmented approach which locates responsibility for different services in different

parts of the university under the management of different officers. He then offered several examples of integrated approaches which had been stimulated by both local and national guidance.

This argument was based on the essential premise that, if students are to be satisfied in an ever more challenging (and consumer-oriented) world, then a “joined-up” approach is essential, leading to improved efficiency and effectiveness. It also assumed that the whole student experience encompasses much more than classroom/laboratory based activities. This is recognised by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in its existing subject review methodology. Other UK agencies, notably the Funding Councils, are eager to ensure Value for Money in the provision of such services by all institutions. However, across the UK there is no one model in relation to student support services. Some institutions have adhered to an integrated model for many years. In many others, provision is fragmented, power struggles ensue and the needs of students (customers) are forgotten.

Approaches based on Business Process improvement should in theory lead to improved effectiveness – after all, Service Heads often admit to “fighting fires” under significant pressure without adequately addressing whether they have the right fire fighting equipment or whether they are even fighting the right fires! However, systematic approaches to these problems often end with out (positive) resolution. Service level agreements (SLA’s) such as ISO9001 all result in an apparent – and sometimes real – bureaucracy which impedes strategic progress.

One answer is a managed approach where support services are joined up. Jon explained that such a model does not necessarily imply common line-management but probably requires a co-location of the key players. It requires a student support strategy within which it can work. He developed the theme of the “one-stop shop” mentioned by earlier speakers, and provided a diagrammatic view of how such a system allowed a common institutional contact point, with expert advice either in open areas or private rooms. Jon’s major argument was underpinned by the centrality of students as part of university business, and he dismissed as worthless and dangerous the sort of attitude where staff seemed to think that “if it wasn’t for the students I could get on with my job”.

Finally he pointed out that it was always easier for a student to complain about the wide range of support services than about the more limited academic experience, and he advised colleagues to think about inviting compliments as well as complaints. He quoted from a British report on “Improving the Management of Support Services in Higher Education”, and recalled the huge investment which support services represented .

The Role of Student Services in a Research-led Environment

*David Owens, University of Cardiff (UK)*

David Owens illustrated one facet of such investment by describing the re-development of buildings in order to provide stimulating accommodation for postgraduate students. He also developed the idea of the one-stop shop and joining up various services to supplement the academic activities of students. Such services were all the more important in the UK in the light of increasingly large financial contributions (and debt) incurred by students. He described in particular the Cardiff Graduate Centre, which had been created to improve the academic and social environment of postgraduate students.

His talk addressed the role of Student Services in a research-led university whose mission is "to pursue research of international excellence and research-led learning and teaching of the highest quality", so both research and students are vital to its purpose. Indeed the latter still underpin its funding and attracting and retaining students through a worthwhile student experience are essential activities.

The student experience is increasingly characterised by financial concerns. Many undergraduate students must now help pay their tuition fees and take out loans to fund their living expenses. Debt is therefore a problem for many and the Student Services Division (SSD) spends a good deal of time and effort distributing government Access Hardship grants as efficiently, compassionately and justly as possible. These challenges are increased by the government encouraged thrusts to 'widen participation' and 'increase access' which may well result in a more heterogeneous student body, but one also with more issues that student services departments must help resolve.

Postgraduate students are part of the life blood of a research-led University. Yet, financial concerns also figure largely in the lives of postgraduate students who also face high intellectual and related academic demands, as well as the need for self-discipline and independent study. Too often this can lead to real and perceived isolation, demotivation leading to lower quality work or even the abandoning of their studies. To offset this Cardiff University has recently established a Graduate Centre. The Centre provides information, advice, support, information technology equipment, a bar and coffee lounge and a thriving social environment. Although it has only been open a year, it is highly valued by students and staff, and may well have direct academic benefits as well as helping the postgraduate student experience become more fulfilling and rewarding generally.

This kind of initiative is a major contribution to student services in a research led university, and its success is due in no small measure to an effective interplay between the relevant academic and administrative parts of the University, the Students Union, and the users themselves. These features are essential for all Student Services, of course, and not just restricted to postgraduates. As at least one other speaker had commented, the provision of students services is a joint effort and activities need to be integrated. Further, student services are as vital to research-led universities as those concerned predominantly with teaching. For students underpin the

definition of a University, and meeting their academic and related needs an essential priority, and a constant challenge, for institutions of higher education.

In discussion it became clear that the rigid distinction between undergraduate and postgraduate students in Britain was something which intrigued non-UK participants. It was pointed out and agreed that joined-up services required both time and money. The speakers also agreed that the interface with academic colleagues was vital – at Cardiff the induction programme for new staff included an introduction to Student Services.

Following the closure of the seminar participants were able to benefit from exceptionally warm temperatures and clear skies to pay a visit to the Mont Saint-Michel. The magnificent medieval monastery (a spiritual one-stop shop for pilgrims) had been constructed without input from a Quality Assurance Agency, and – suitably uplifted – members were able to benefit from the support services offered by a gastronomic restaurant on the return journey to Rennes.