

Career Start Canterbury

Canterbury Christ Church
University



Pilot project into the
international student
experience in the UK
2017-18

UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

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FOR INTERNATIONAL
EDUCATION

Career Start Canterbury Canterbury Christ Church University

Laura Spencer, International Development Manager



Project outcomes

The project has helped highlight to international students the value of professional networks in generating unique connections and relevant work experience. It has sought to provide a platform from which they can gain a deeper understanding of UK business culture and access to local social life through an ambitious and exclusive collaboration that promotes a concerted and systematic approach to enhancing the international student experience. Furthermore, aspects of it have promoted dialogue between home and international students helping to create meaningful friendships and community links for both.

About Canterbury Christ Church University

Internationalisation of the student body is of vital importance to Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) and is demonstrated by its increasingly global orientation. This vision is marketed to both domestic and international students and, as a consequence, the University is developing a range of strategies for integration of its international students into the local community.

Why this project?

Anecdotal evidence has previously identified a need for international students to be given specific support to find meaningful work prospects. It is acknowledged by Spencer-Oatey & Dauber (2018) that employers look to recruit graduates with 'global skills'. Developing global graduates forms an important strand of the CCCU Internationalisation agenda.

Canterbury is a small city boasting three universities and several further education colleges and competition for experiential learning and work placements is fierce. This, coupled with the fact the University is alert to opportunities for cross-cultural engagement, led to the initiative being developed. The project was specifically designed to take advantage of the fact there are several Rotary Clubs in Canterbury; each with extensive local and global connections. One in particular (the Rotary Club of Canterbury Sunrise) has collaborated with CCCU on previous occasions and is keen to support schemes such as this. A similar programme has proven extremely successful in Australia ('g'day [sa]').

Aims of the project

- Help prepare international students for the global workplace through sustainable work-related activities, civic service and professional networking; all of which are concepts supported and championed by local Rotarians

- Encourage students to design a personalised package of activities based upon needs they themselves have identified
- Promote community cohesion by advocating the idea of partnership between CCCU, Christ Church Students' Union (CCSU) and local Rotary Clubs

Set-up and evaluation

As a medium through which to deliver the project, Christ Church International Rotaract Club was created with support from the project lead. It was decided to locate the club within CCSU to ensure student buy-in; it is open to all but, for the purpose of this project, specifically promoted to international students. It is a fully established club with agreed constitution and elected officers. Email and social media accounts were created and marketing materials produced. Regular committee meetings have taken place throughout the year with guest speakers invited by the student members. Some speakers were Rotarians, chosen because of their specific business backgrounds and others were representatives from local charities. Fundraising events have also taken place, including a Christmas shoebox collection. Christ Church International Rotaract Club is mentored by members of the Rotary Club of Canterbury Sunrise.

The strength of this project lies in the fact it endeavours to be as student-driven as possible. International Rotaract students were encouraged to identify their own employability needs via informal focus groups and discussions conducted by the project lead. Students were then invited to participate in a bespoke employability package delivered throughout the academic year which included a combination of core and free choice activities designed in collaboration with the Rotarian mentors.

Examples of 'work ready' activities delivered by Rotarian mentors included:

- CVs and interviewing techniques
- Presentation skills
- 'Working Across Cultures: Critical Incidents and What They Tell Us'
- Professional work-based learning opportunities in fields such as Broadcasting; Law; Publishing; Police; Speech and Language Therapy – diverse vocations that reflected Rotarian areas of expertise (NB: these were purposefully not described as 'work experience' or 'placements' for the simple fact that each varied in terms of format. The intention was for them to be seen as 'tasters' and an opportunity for exposure to a particular working environment without being overly burdensome on the individual hosting the session.)



International Rotaract students were then supported to connect with the wider Rotary network by attending local meetings, events and national conferences. This was with a view to better understanding business and civic culture and to enjoy opportunities for:

- professional networking
- business conversation
- international fellowship
- community integration

Towards the end of the academic year, participants were encouraged to demonstrate 'job readiness' via participation in the Christ Church Extra Award (Higher Education Achievement Report).

Key findings and learning points

The project is helping to secure an equitable student experience for international student participants by facilitating links with the local community and actively developing networks to support their post study employment. All the while, it is promoting the exchange of ideas and sharing of best practice; emphasising the benefits to students of being able to articulate how they add value to future employers.

Participants are very receptive to the idea of forming links with clubs in their home countries and discussing future joint fundraising initiatives. There is evidence of real passion and commitment amongst students to make connections beyond the university. Where this has happened, participants agree that their day-to-day experience is enriched and are only too happy to speak positively about the project to their peers.

Participants have enjoyed the opportunity to engage in individual coaching sessions delivered by a CCCU Careers Adviser. Sessions were designed to encourage Rotaract members to set clear goals and identify realistic approaches to achieving them.

Professional work-based learning opportunities (generally lasting a day) were far easier for the project lead to negotiate and manage than would have been the case for longer term placements. They were designed to be 'tasters' and an opportunity for students to ask mentors about their chosen career path.

Student feedback

"I recognise that many university students in Canterbury invest their free time in their future career. I have wanted to behave like them."

"Thank you for giving me a hands-on experience of British life."

"Being part of the Rotaract Club means to be part of a worldwide community which has the aim to spread the meaning of goodwill and peace. It is great that there is an opportunity for the younger ones to be part of this amazing project."

"Being a part of Rotaract allows me to be part of a community."

"I enjoy getting involved with like-minded people who are dedicated to providing service at the local, national and international level."

"It allows me not only to be able to do what I love, but also allows me to build up myself on a more professional level, through working together on projects and through meeting good speakers."

"Joining Rotaract is one of the best decisions I have made in my life."

"I wanted to thank you for reaching out to me and getting me involved with the"

Rotaract initiative. The sessions I attended were very insightful and inspiring. I am very grateful for the opportunities this presented.”

Timescale

Officially, the project ran from September 2017 to June 2018. However, due to positive engagement and the feedback received, university money has been set aside so that it may continue.

Phase 1 (September 2017): Participants were recruited to the project through a promotional stand at Fresher’s Fair and direct invitations

Phase 2 (October – November 2017): Creation of Christ Church International Rotaract Club

Phase 3 (October 2017 – March 2018): Participants undertook a series of ‘work ready’ activities

Phase 4 (March – June 2018): Participants connected with a local Rotary Club

Phase 5 (June 2018): Collation of feedback and impact assessment conducted

Challenges

The project has not been without challenges although each of these can, in future, be mitigated with appropriate staff and student buy-in.

- At the start of the project, international students were significantly underrepresented in terms of CCSU involvement. Creativity and perseverance was required in advertising the project and attracting them to it
- Motivating students who expressed an initial interest in the project but declined to commit over the long-term due to academic pressures and general lack of time can be disheartening and required a degree of staff resilience
- Ingenuity is sometimes required to help students identify the intangible benefits of building professional networks
- Time, energy and enthusiasm is required to help students navigate the formalities involved in officially chartering a Rotaract Club (indeed, this process has been delayed until next academic year once the club is more established)
- Extensive liaison and diary management with both students and external stakeholders required considerable staff time, particularly in the early days of the project when it was vital to maintain momentum
- Mitigating the perennial problem posed by students graduating was, and is, a challenge. New participants must be recruited each year to ensure continuity



Sustainability

Despite the challenges, the project is very affordable, sustainable and can be easily replicated across the sector. Relatively little money is required; rather a commitment to foster ties between international students, the university and the local community. The project also impacts positively on the ways in which we serve domestic students by promoting and encouraging conversation and a collaborative approach amongst all participants regardless of nationality. As the club has grown, more domestic students have expressed an interest in joining.

The project promotes the idea of students ‘personalising’ their university experience by allowing them to share newly-acquired employability skills with the local community. Crucially, the benefits are long-term in that Rotarian connections made in the UK can be enjoyed by international students who elect to join their ‘home’ club in future. The project promotes the concept of ‘end to end’ experiences which do not cease upon graduation and serves as an effective retention tool. It is recognised that international applicants are increasingly looking for sophisticated offerings when deciding where to study. A project such as this helps offer a point of differentiation while encouraging international students to be university advocates in the community and ambassadors of the UK when back at home.

The involvement of Rotary helps ensure that high quality intercultural interactions are enjoyed and gives students increased opportunities to participate in life-enriching activities. The intention was always for this project to be viewed as a prestigious opportunity that offers a unique insight into the world of work.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Building links with local Rotary Clubs is essential for the project to function. This is relatively easy given that Rotary is a non-political, non-religious global network that supports education
- For participation to be seen as desirable, it is essential to promote the project as offering something both personally enriching and of relevant professional value
- Many international students already have a basic appreciation of the objects of Rotary, often due to parental involvement at home. It is worth harnessing this understanding by advertising opportunities pre-arrival
- To help attract future participants, it is important for students to be given ample chance to share their opinions of the project. They can do this by attending re-fresher's events, writing reviews for the student paper and by appearing in marketing videos designed for incoming students; all the while promoting the benefits of taking part
- Students should be supported to identify personal development opportunities with the help of Rotarian mentors
- Rotarians are often well-connected to local dignitaries who in turn can be invited to support functions. International students typically enjoy civic occasions and can be empowered to utilise their newly acquired employability skills to help host events. This then generates further publicity and helps sustain the project
- Students should be encouraged to attend Rotaract meetings in their home country and/or look for opportunities to 'twin' and work on joint initiatives
- It is useful for a skills awareness assessment to be conducted at the start and end of the project to monitor how participation has added value to each individual
- Reflective diaries and skills monitoring toolkits are mechanisms we intend to introduce next academic year
- Given sufficient resourcing, this specific project can be easily extended to domestic students

References and Links

Canterbury International Rotaract Club (2018) <https://ccsu.co.uk/organisation/9643/> [accessed 20 June 2018]

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Further information

This project was designed and delivered by **Laura Spencer**, International Development Manager, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Contact: laura.spencer@canterbury.ac.uk

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

UKCISA
1st Floor, Noble House
3-5 Islington High Street
London, N1 9LQ
T +44 (0)20 7288 4330

www.ukcisa.org.uk
@ukcisa

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