

**Napier University in partnership with LINKnet Mentoring**

**International Alliance Project**

**February 2008 – March 2009**

**Written for the Scottish Government's Review of the  
Fresh Talent Initiative**

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In this article I am going to outline and review the first phase of this project (February – September); outline the changes introduced in to phase two (October to March); give a constructive critique on the likely success of this project within Napier and the Fresh Talent Scheme, as perceived through my work and the experience of the students and graduates I have been working with. Finally, I will make some recommendations which I believe will make the whole scheme work better.

### **The first phase of the project.**

I was employed to start work in February 2008 and to implement a project already designed. There had been delays in making the appointment, so from the start there were time pressures and restrictions. This was the third time the university had applied for FT Challenge funding and the first time it had been successful. The success was attributed to the partnership established with LINKnet Mentoring and its focus on developing the Employability skills of our international students. LINKnet is a voluntary sector organisation which I had the privilege to be involved with during its foundation, ten years ago. It is a specialised mentoring organisation working with minority ethnic individuals and therefore well placed to work with international students.

The project had four key features to be delivered: running a series of employability seminars; establishing mentoring partnerships; finding work placements for the students during the summer holidays, and doing outreach work with 50 employers on highlighting the benefits of the FT Scheme.

Before any of this could happen there needed to be a cohort of students interested in the project. Publicity was sent by email to all students inviting them to a presentation that was repeated at different times and campuses during March. Over a hundred final year students attended and thirty signed up to the programme. There was almost an even split between Bachelors and Masters students. The gender ratio was about 4:1

male:female, whilst there was a broad representation from African and Asian countries, one student from the Ukraine and one from the USA.

The Employability seminars were organised and it was unfortunate that the only time they could be delivered was during the exam period, and on a less used campus, which affected attendance. The seminars themselves were well delivered and well received. They involved the Relocation Advisory Service, detailing the procedures for visa applications; Jobcentre Plus focussing on job vacancy research; Napier's *Confident Futures* delivering an interactive session on the importance of Networking; and the Careers Service delivered two seminars covering CV and job application writing as well as interview preparation. The final session which provided refreshments, and was attended by invited staff, was on Scottish Cultural Awareness.

This last session looked good on paper – but what can you do in one hour? Whose perception of Scottish culture? I decided to assemble a panel of six friends who had settled in Scotland from as little as six months ago, to over forty years. They came from three continents, three different religious backgrounds, male and female, ages 24-60 and with two of them being Napier graduates. Each told of some of their experiences of “Scottish culture” – it was very interesting to see ourselves as other see us! The student group were soon involved with their anecdotal stories which was thoroughly enjoyable as well as informative!

The group by now was down to 24, still split evenly between Masters and Bachelors students. However, it was soon clear that the *one size fits all* thinking in the original project outline was going to throw up a few problems. The Bachelors students would be finished their courses and ready for mentoring and work placements very soon, while the Masters students were busy with dissertations, part-time jobs and were not free for work placements and well – there weren't enough mentors recruited for all at this point.

### **Recruiting Mentors**

Following advice from LINKnet on the qualities and characteristics needed for a good mentor, I searched address books and email lists of all my friends and contacts. I found what I thought would be 24 excellent mentors, emailed them with an outline of the project and the commitment needed from a mentor. In my unbounded optimism, I expected to hear back from all of them within a day or two with a response like – *great this is what I have always wanted to be doing* – it didn't happen! However, I did get eight responses and a few successful introductions to their friends and family. The students and the mentors went through separate training delivered by LINKnet staff and I was on my way to matching up all the Bachelors students. Gradually through the partnership working with LINKnet I was able to find more mentors and the Masters students were also matched. This was not an easy task – but the partnership was working.

### **Finding Work Placements**

I am afraid this was not the same success story. The task was to find placements in small to medium size enterprises. A Napier database from the Careers Department was used to email over 200 employers – only two responded positively! There was a better response from Public Sector employers. Eight of my group applied for a *Diversity placement* with the Scottish Government, and four were successful. This was good as the application to offer rate overall in the scheme was four to one. These placements all proved to be excellent, with one student still continuing, and being paid a salary.

Edinburgh City Council was running a *Public Sector Academy* on to which several students were placed – again to a high level of satisfaction. The NHS also took placements. Such placements with private companies, especially in the Finance sector came up against their intern schemes which needed to be applied for before the previous Christmas! Some students were never placed and most of the Masters students have not yet had work placement experience.

### **Employer Outreach**

Given the previous experience with work placements, an Employer event was arranged in partnership with the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce. With over 2,000 members they thought it would attract at least 60-70 employers. Publicity material was prepared for the Chamber's website and direct emailing and expanded Napier databases were also contacted. I even ensured the Tuesday evening was not clashing with Champions League football matches. The result was three employers signed up and the event was cancelled. They were each offered a personal visit, however, all declined! The post-mortem concluded that there was nothing more we could have done to promote the event. This is a serious issue to which I will return.

### **The new programme**

This was presented to the FT Challenge Fund and it received approval. It was to last six months and therefore cover only the first half of the academic year and involved a cut to four days a week. It meant however, that students could be attracted early and given advice on activities that might contribute to enhanced employability skills. There was a menu of activities offered for consideration, but this phase is still in its early days.

### **The Critique**

I make no apology for approaching this from the perspectives of the International Students. Indeed, I would have preferred the address to be given by one or more of them. I trust Napier University and the Scottish Government will not take offence by any of my remarks but see this as a positive contribution to the review and the debate.

Part of the task of the second phase of this project is to embed changes in the University that will lead to better serving of the needs of International students. This will be addressed as priority in the first three months of 2009.

My perceptions to date are that Universities are huge institutions that change slowly and are even slower to take note of new ideas coming from others who are not long-serving university staff. Apart from the valiant efforts of a handful of university staff, I have been disappointed with the lack of interest and lack of support in driving the international student agenda through this programme. There are reasons given such as other change agendas taking up staff time, other work pressures but there has also been protection of existing departmental contacts with employers. I feel that there is a lack of vision of the bigger picture the University should be embracing as a whole, in a cooperative and united manner. The funding for this post runs out in March and I am fearful that most of my work, other than positive support to a minority of students, will be like water in the sand.

I took this appointment because I am a passionate internationalist. I have worked overseas and at home in an international and multi-ethnic context for most of my varied career. I have an international family. When I first heard of the Scottish Government's Fresh Talent Scheme I became an instant supporter – albeit from a distance and in an unengaged way. After appointment, I eagerly researched the progress the scheme was making and found little hard information. I read through the glowing accounts of case studies posted on the Government website and sought out a few of the Napier graduates and met them. They were most enthusiastic about making a new life in Scotland.

But there were others, not featured on the website and I suspect the overwhelming majority who were languishing in poorly paid jobs with little prospect of graduate employment before their visa ran out. I visited one employer, delighted to recruit these international graduates, including those with a Masters degree – very able – hard working – productive and reliable, all for £7 per hour! Any chance of moving on to their graduate scheme - no chance at all! Others have left for their home countries disillusioned! How much worse will this become with an economic down turn?

However, the ray of hope is that under the Post Study Work visa it will be easier for these graduates to stay on with their employer and thus may diminish the prejudice which has been built up by employers to the Fresh Talent Scheme.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

For Universities, International student recruitment is a vital aspect of their economies. Scottish institutions have had a competitive advantage over those in the rest of the UK. This has been recognised but with the introduction of the PSW visa, this has now evaporated. All the more important for our universities to be aware of how the student experience can be enhanced for this group.

Their needs are different and need to be addressed in a different way to home students in many aspects of academic study and life in general. Alumni will always be the best ambassadors if their experience is positive. I also believe there is a moral responsibility on Universities to address the needs of international students given the high fees charged and the huge investment and sacrifice many of the students' families make, to send their children here.

Imaginative partnerships should be nurtured and developed. The Napier partnership with LINKnet Mentoring has been the most valuable aspect of this project and is an example of a partnership that could be replicated with other universities. The student feedback indicated that the mentoring relationship was the most useful of all aspects of this project.

Given the economic climate changing daily around us and the right wing press always eager to raise the immigration issue and *jobs being taken away from our sons and daughters*, I question the Government's positive commitment to this initiative. There needs to be a concerted effort at Government level to educate our employers about the changes in the scheme which are now stacked heavily to their advantage. After two years they will have ownership of the Work Permit and therefore can be confident of retaining quality staff. The cancellation of our Employers Event last month was not through any fault of the organisers and the solution lies in hands beyond ours.

It needs a joined up approach from various branches of Government. It needs coordinated efforts by our universities both internally and externally (in their recruitment) to develop the Scottish brand rather than individual brands. Most universities have to an extent niche markets for their courses and could probably benefit more from co-operating than competing. Scotland should remain a destination of choice for international students for the quality of the university experience they can enjoy and the welcoming of our employers to recruit from this rich pool of talent.

I remain a firm internationalist. I remain a firm optimist. However, this conference should not leave a feeling of complacency, but one of challenge for all of us who are committed and indeed benefit from the international student presence in our universities, towns and cities. We must keep ahead of the game and that means reviewing our strategies, practices and their outcomes and setting the bar higher.