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International Officer as FAST worker and researcher

Hold FAST, work FAST.

We are in a very privileged position in our roles as 'international officers', 'academic advisors' or 'student exchange co-ordinators' - or any other title which encompasses the vast array of work that we do. Privileged? Yes, indeed. It is widely acknowledged that a period of study abroad is one of the most formative experiences within the life of a young person. We are all perfectly familiar with the widely used statements that the students 'gain independence', 'develop competencies for future employment', 'make friends from many different countries', 'develop language skills' and so many other similar expressions. All true. We see it ourselves – we watch our students develop and gain these attributes. We are indeed privileged to be the recipients of enthusiastic and excited messages - we have all heard: "It was the best year of my life!" I further feel privileged to have met and worked with so many wonderful people worldwide, engaged in the same sort of work that I do, and with the same approach.

Even if I stopped doing this job tomorrow my sense of privilege and feeling that I had contributed in some small way would never leave me. But in thinking about the actual day-to-day reality of how we set up these experiences for students I think several other words sit alongside 'privilege'.

We need to be **flexible**. We have knowledge about our own institutions, and we know exactly what the students have to achieve while they are studying abroad. In most cases we have developed a knowledge of the marking systems used in our partner universities and we have a general awareness of the different styles of teaching and different rules and regulations associated with the differing classroom environments. In our home universities we have to be prepared to find a way to make things work, to 'fit in' a semester-only student to a year-long module without causing the computer to crash; we have to be able to respond with equanimity to the numerous questions asked by students and colleagues. We are often additionally heading up a team, so have to be able to successfully manage and lead co-workers, often with a high workload and working under pressure. Can we adapt our current programs so that there is a perfect fit for incoming exchange students? We want to do the very best we can to ensure that our incoming exchange students gain

valuable, worthwhile, rewarding academic and social experiences with us. But academic regulations in many universities were not set up with exchange students in mind. Although for decades it has been the case that students studying languages would spend time abroad this has not been the case across the length and breadth of universities and therefore so much adaptation is currently required to fit the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century geographically mobile students. We must work within our regulatory framework to build new foundations. To use the idiom expressing the concept of 'having to change hats' - we have another moment, another task, another hat !

The success revolves around flexibility and 'changing hats'.

The second word is that in our role as international officers we must be **aware**. What is it really like to travel, in many cases, alone, to a different country and university? It is not simply this aspect of travel which has long been in operation, but to conduct this time with the pressure of knowing that it all counts for their academic result. It is not simply a chance to live abroad and have fun (important though that is). Can we put ourselves into the position of the student? Have we done this ourselves? For the students to know that we have an awareness means they will respect our judgement or suggestions. Even as staff members who may not have studied abroad, it is our choice when visiting partners to not utilize taxis but to literally step on the local bus or walk, in order to see the current experience through the student's eyes. We need empathy, awareness, and can also show it.

My third word is that we need to be **scholarly**. We have to have scholarship and we need to be able to promote our scholarship research. What exactly is our area of specialisation? Where is our expertise? Amidst the backdrop of increasing workloads, to also serve as a member of academic faculty, and to produce research is no small consideration. Yet we should acknowledge, that without realising it, we have developed a wealth of knowledge and this knowledge is to be shared for the betterment of others. Where should scholarship lie? Since I first joined EAIE around eight years ago I have observed much written in the field of research within international education. What a wonderful situation we find ourselves in – limits of time notwithstanding, to be in an environment where our privileged roles also provide much input for research is something to celebrate. It is my firm belief that those of us who deal with this work day-to-day indeed do have something to contribute – but where time for writing fits in with everything else could be seen itself

as a source of further study!

Finally, we stand as **teachers**. We are teachers and educators. Certainly meeting with a group of students, talking to them about possible opportunities abroad is a form of teaching. Providing guidance, being advisors and confidantes throughout their time abroad are perfect examples of formative teaching. Students look to us a source of knowledge, and as guides and mentors.

We stand FAST. We are dedicated workers working alongside many other dedicated professionals in various fields and with the privilege of working with conscientious young people as they embark on their personal development in readiness for their future lives. As we stand FAST, students draw from this. We hold fast to our principles and thus represent a firm, fast unit on which our students can rely. We work FAST - we have to work fast, as time is of the essence in our work. We fulfil all the requirements of Flexibility, Awareness, Scholarship and Teaching; through sharing our knowledge and our experiences, and by working together we can expand and develop our field so that no longer will exchange student activity be peripheral or require adaptation. It will become mainstream and a strong, cohesive element of worldwide education, producing dedicated, confident, respectful and positive global citizens, who carry these principles fast and firm to the next generation of internationally experienced students in a globalized world.

Rosemary Smith

Cardiff Business School

Director of International Student Exchange

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