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Another country: the trans-Atlantic alliance and the benefits of studying abroad in the USA

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Abstract

This paper, which is written by an American LJMU-based academic, reflects on the new strategic alliance between LJMU and Southern Connecticut State University. In particular, in highlighting the experiences likely for LJMU students whilst studying in the USA, it provides a succinct overview of the post-compulsory US education, underlining the different experiences of the US student compared with their UK counterpart. The paper further emphasises the benefits likely for LJMU students as a result of this alliance.

Keywords

US education; culture; internationalisation; strategic alliances; collaborative provision

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Another Country

LJMU and Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut, USA announced the launch of a Trans-Atlantic Alliance in September 2015. Launch is an apt word, because both cities share history and past glory as port cities, being Atlantic gateways connecting Old and New Worlds. The purpose of this article is to explore the rationale behind and potential benefits of studying abroad in the USA in the wake of the establishment of this partnership.

LJMU wants to give every student the opportunity to study abroad. As part of the University's internationalisation strategy, this will be embedded across all programmes coming in with the new academic framework. The framework allows programmes to provide space for a semester's study abroad. The University is recognising what research and consultation with employers has shown for years – that graduates benefit from international experience and employers perceive this as added value for degree holders.

Much of LJMU's student body is domiciled near the University and many of our graduates, formally or informally, express a desire to stay in the region when they complete their degrees. This is a wonderful sentiment, but the entry of many of our graduates into the graduate level jobs for which they are so well trained can be delayed due to the relatively low availability of appropriate graduate-level jobs in the region. Study abroad opportunities can make a difference here, broadening the horizons of many students. It can give our graduates the confidence that they can function in strange environments and provide them with the knowledge that they can succeed further afield than close to home.

Studying abroad has advantages for students; the experience of studying overseas can really boost a student's performance on their degree course, and their confidence levels in general. Perhaps,

as tutor or programme leader you've had a chance to see how students have benefitted from integrated study away from LJMU? Personally I've seen several students who were lacking confidence or direction completely transformed by summer work-based learning opportunities overseas. Sandwich placements can have a similar developmental effect, but these tend to be more UK based. The International Relations team within the University's professional services are working hard to ensure that there are opportunities for our students to study abroad when the first cohort comes through, in 2017-18.

The now commonplace observation that the US and UK are 'separated by a common language' is worth discussing here. It's no secret that foreign language instruction in the UK leaves a lot to be desired, both in terms of take-up at the secondary and tertiary level and, in terms of how well language instruction prepares students for life in a non-Anglophone context. Whilst some of our students have good language ability and training, their lack of confidence may affect their desire to take up the sorts of overseas training opportunities traditionally provided by EU-funded Erasmus placements. This is gradually changing, as an increasing number of continental universities are providing instruction in English, particularly at postgraduate level. However, language abilities can constrain our students' desire to study or make visits overseas.

It is within this context of internationalisation that LJMU has formed a strategic partnership with Southern Connecticut State University (abbreviated as SCSU or called 'Southern' by staff and students). We chose them as a partner because their outlook and their historical and geographical situation is so similar to ours; we are two universities which have similar, and now shared vision and ambition. Founded as a teacher's college in 1893, Southern is one of four universities within the Connecticut State University system. The system also has twelve community

colleges and one college delivering on-line courses. There are, altogether, more than ninety thousand students enrolled in the system. Our strategic partnership is ambitious and weaves together many strands of our international development strategy, but the one I will focus on here is the opportunity to study abroad that this partnership will deliver.

Southern is a campus university. It is located about three miles from downtown New Haven in a village called Westville. The campus is beautiful, with new and established buildings and dormitories in a wooded setting in the shadow of West Rock, one of the region's most striking geological features. There are approximately 10,000 students enrolled, more than 30 per cent of whom are BME students. As is the case for LJMU, slightly more than half of the students are female. SCSU serves mostly students from within the state of Connecticut, and only about five per cent of students live outside the state. To put this in perspective, Connecticut's population is about 3.5 million and, in area, it is slightly larger than one-tenth the size of England. New Haven's population is 130,000 and it is part of a larger urban area of around a million inhabitants. Originally founded in 1638 by English puritans, the city has a rich history, the earliest part of which is tied with its British founders and even tangentially related to the English Civil War. More specifically of interest to students, New Haven claims to be the origin of several student dietary staples, to wit, hamburgers (Louis' Lunch on Crown Street – 1900) and pizza (or the local variant, apizza, created by Frank Pepe's Pizzeria Neapolitana in Wooster Square – 1925).

I am stressing the similarities in language (and diet) our students will face when they visit New Haven and Southern. Experiencing the US social milieu and educational system will give them plenty of challenges and developmental opportunities. This is particularly because of the cognitive dissonance many who are familiar with American culture will experience when

actually trying to navigate the US 'in real life'. There are many reasons for this, the first of which is that American culture is not monolithic; it is not what you would expect based on what you see on TV or in the cinema. The experience of LJMU students studying in New Haven, Connecticut will be very different from their experiences of studying at home. Some of this will be down to their social lives, which I will not explore except to say that the legal drinking age in Connecticut is twenty one. The main difference will be the educational landscape that they will face and into which they will integrate.

Tertiary education in the USA is very different from our English system, and the differences actually start from the secondary school level. Secondary school students do not specialise in subjects, as is the case for English A-level or BTEC students. They may progress further in some subjects or in all, by accessing the AP (Advanced Placement) subjects which many secondary schools (high schools in the USA) provide. Bachelor's degrees are four year programmes. Tertiary education is almost universally referred to in the USA as 'college', notwithstanding whether the institution is a four-year college or a postgraduate degree awarding university. Two-year institutions (the public versions of these are usually referred to as 'community colleges') grant 'associate's degrees' after two years of study. Following this, many community college students then progress onto four year Bachelor's degrees with advanced standing. Considering the high cost of university in the US, this community college introduction to tertiary education is highly cost effective for students. For this reason, many four-year colleges and universities, but particularly public ones, experience an uptick in student numbers in second and third year enrolments.

Since US high school students don't specialise, they are often undecided as to what 'major' they will do in college. A major would be the equivalent of a programme of study in a UK university, but

with some important differences. Applicants are asked what they would like to study when they apply to university, but this is rarely carved in stone. Qualifications for professional subjects, such as law and medicine, are at postgraduate level in the US. The US educational system will generally give university students many chances to study new topics at tertiary level and to change their original choices. This is because the first year or two of many university's courses consist of 'liberal arts' modules (often called 'distribution requirements' because students are required to 'distribute' their modules across different subject areas) 'forcing' the unscientific to take science courses and the 'un-artsy' to take humanities courses. This requires all students to experience learning outside their 'comfort zones'. In many cases, this can be transformational. Students usually do not have to declare their majors (e.g. the subject in which a majority of their studies will be focussed) until their second (sciences) or even third year. Usually a major consists of a suite of courses which must be taken, some of which are what we would consider core and others optional; there is usually both an upper and lower limit for the courses within a major, so that students don't specialise too much. There is also an opportunity to specialise in a second subject, called a 'minor,' which will have a similar set of rules for module choice. Some particularly focused students, generally those who decide early in their academic careers, can have double majors and fulfil the requirements for more than one degree within the constraints of overall credit maximums.

There is also less emphasis on 'levelness' in US degree programmes. That is not to say that modules don't have levels; they do, and these are usually indicated in their 'codes' (e.g. 100-level for first year modules and 200-level for second year, etc.). However, due to programming vicissitudes and late choices, it's not always possible to do these in 'order'. Because of this, US universities have larger module catalogues and more flexibility in their delivery. As an example,

consider this scenario. History majors are required to take History 350 to graduate. However, this module is only offered in the spring semester of alternate years. If enrolment is limited, a student might have to wait to take this module, and if the student can't enrol within their four years, it might even delay graduation. This is one reason why many US students take longer than four years to complete a bachelor's degree. There is a lot of choreography involved in ensuring that degree requirements are met within circumscribed timelines. Of course, the opposite scenario also occurs. Lower level courses which fulfil distribution requirements may be offered every semester, often in several 'sections' in order to keep individual class sizes down.

Another eye-opener for UK students will be the marking system in the USA. Marks are generally higher with marks above 80 very common, and final degree classifications don't exist. Instead, students' results are characterised by GPAs or Grade Point Averages. A mark of 90 or above is equivalent to an 'A' or 4.0; 80 or above to a B or 3.0, etc., and means of these marks can be calculated for semester, year and overall career. Some universities adjust GPA calculations for levelness or other consideration. Many US students have to maintain particular GPAs to continue to receive scholarships, participate on sports teams etc., so these levels are monitored throughout their academic careers.

For staff and students, there are advantages, as well as disadvantages to the US system. First, it's much more flexible for both student and staff. Team teaching is unusual in the USA, so most academics will usually have an agreed course load, which varies from '2+2' e.g. two modules each semester to as much as '4+4' or more. Staff will be fully responsible for the delivery and assessment of these modules (although they will often have the helping hands of a postgraduate teaching assistant to do some marking or run discussion or laboratory sessions in research intensive universities). Administrative roles usually entitle one to

time off for good behaviour – e.g. a reduction in teaching to compensate for the extra aggravation and or paperwork. The flexible delivery system means that some modules are taught more frequently than others, but this also means that individual staff have a broader portfolio of teaching, teaching highly specialised topics regularly, if less frequently. Finally, the QA system which governs UK universities (double marking, external examining and assessment boards) does not exist in the US. Usually, exams are in May and so is graduation, so the QA mechanisms focus on institutional accreditation rather than monitoring assessment in individual programmes.

In summary, although US and UK institutions both operate in the English language, there are plenty of educational differences between these systems, even without considering the cultural differences beyond the ivory tower. LJMU students will

have a chance to immerse themselves in US university student culture, which is very community spirited and energetic. This is partly because US students truly identify with their institutions, not only during the period of their study but, forever afterwards. That isn't to say that US students aren't critical of their universities – they are often a university's most vocal critics and weigh in on issues as diverse as employee contract negotiations, tenure decisions, investment strategies, etc. However, this is usually done in a developmental way. Since students identify so strongly with their institutions they want their university to reflect their values, in the best possible way. The student culture of the USA will also be an eye-opener for LJMU students, and they will have a chance to immerse themselves in their alma mater away from home and make life-long connections which will benefit them in their presence at LJMU and in their futures.