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World cruise of luxury learning for students with spare £10,000

By Julie Henry, Education Correspondent, Sunday Telegraph

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Aboard a liner with three pools, a theatre, restaurants, and an itinerary taking in five continents, it offers a degree of luxury unsurpassed by any but the most exclusive holidays.

But this cruise will also count towards the final honours for its passenger list of students.

One British university has already signed up for the "Scholar Ship", a floating university which will take 600 undergraduates and postgraduates on a 16-week voyage of discovery.

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Instead of making the most of cramped halls of residence, stodgy refectory food and cheap beer, they will set sail in September from Athens and cross the Mediterranean and Atlantic to the Americas, the South Pacific and Asia, stopping for up to a week at nine ports for specially-designed shore excursions and field trips.

The cruise shows the extent to which undergraduates are now regarded as "customers" in the era of £3,000-a-year fees, while allowing the institutions that take part to offer something extra to overseas students, who pay an average of £10,000 a year.

Cardiff is the first British university to join a consortium including Berkeley, in California,

and Macquarie University, in Sydney, working with Royal Caribbean Cruises, which will provide the ship.



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Students who have completed at least one year of university can apply before the April deadline, if they can afford about £10,000 for the tuition fees and board.

"For some time now, there has been a big focus on the globalisation of education and some universities have established campuses overseas," said Sandra Elliott, Cardiff's director of international development. "We think the ship provides a unique learning environment. There will be an international mix of students and the chance to be taught by staff from very prestigious institutions."

Some means-tested financial aid is available. Cardiff will offer five scholarships, covering a proportion of the costs.

In Papeete, the Tahiti capital, students will visit a vanilla and pineapple plantation to learn about sustainable agriculture or a 200-year-old boat building yard to see ships being made from natural materials, then take to the water in tree-trunk outrigger canoes.

The consortium promises that courses in international business and communication, conflict studies, sustainable development, geography and marine science, among others, will be taught by leading academics in specially adapted classrooms, lecture theatres and libraries, with state-of-the-art IT facilities.

After a hard day's study, students can relax in the kind of comfort which holidaymakers pay up to £1,200 a week to enjoy, including two fitness centres, a sports deck and numerous bars and cafes.

Vice-chancellors are increasingly being forced to think creatively about how to "brand" their universities. This year, undergraduates have been lured by fee discounts and bombarded with offers of laptops, free language courses, rent reductions and upgraded facilities.

But it is difficult to compete with the facilities the "Scholar Ship" offers. On Tahiti, students can spend a day snorkelling or scuba-driving along the island's crystal clear waters and coral reefs, with a private guide to take them to hidden lagoons, followed by discussions about the environmental protection issues facing the islands. Students on the conflict studies course, will take a field trip in Cape Town, South Africa, to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was held. Students will meet former guards and inmates for a discussion on the country's past and future.

The following day, they will meet residents and community leaders on the Cape Flats to examine continuing conflicts over land use and development.

Nick Seaton, the chairman of the Campaign for Real Education, said: "With the academic staff getting a free cruise, I can see the attraction. I'm sure it will also appeal to students but I doubt whether there will be many who can afford to consider applying."



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