



The author of this article works with a small team of fellow volunteers to arrange much appreciated hospitality to overseas students. Members of the Cambridge Society in Cambridge are among her 'hosts'.

Welcome to International Students in Cambridge

JOY SEDDON

What is WISC? It is a group of residents in Cambridgeshire who arrange informal introductions for newly arrived international students, studying or undertaking research in the University, to make friends with local families, to visit their homes for a meal and a chat in relaxing surroundings away from the pressures of their studies.

We meet the students when they first arrive at various introductory gatherings arranged by the British Council, the Cambridge Commonwealth Group, the Society for African Students and other similar groups. We are helped with publicity by students who have been here for over a year and have themselves enjoyed family hospitality. The majority of the students are postgraduates on one year Master's degrees or PhDs. Some of them have Chevening awards from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or Cambridge Commonwealth Trust and Cambridge Overseas Trust Scholarships, but many are financed by their families or their employers. Before they are admitted to the University they will have taken exacting tests in the English language but some do find it hard to comprehend rapid spoken English and different local accents.

Most of the students arrive for the beginning of the academic year and have to adjust to a new way of living and studying. If they are here for only one year they face special pressures as they have a daunting amount of work in the short time available to them.

Christmas hospitality

There is no International Student Officer in Cambridge concerned with the pastoral care of the several thousand students dispersed amongst the different Colleges and Faculties. The different Colleges all make their own arrangements for the students with the help of Tutors, Chaplains, porters and bedders, but the picture is patchy. It often comes as an unpleasant shock to the newly arrived to find that the British students leave early in December and that there is little offered by the catering staff between Christmas and New Year, so they have to rely on help from their own ethnic groups unless they are fortunate enough to be invited to join a family for the Christmas Day celebrations.

We are always seeking families who will extend hospitality to an overseas student and know that many lasting friendships have resulted from the initial visits. The students are eager to see how we live and acquire a better understanding of life in this country. They often hope to provide reciprocal hospitality and invite their hosts to visit them when they return home. For example, I went to a wonderful wedding in Singapore last year of a PhD student I had befriended during his years in Cambridge.

If it is possible for students' parents to come to Cambridge for degree days they are very proud to introduce them to local friends.

For further information about WISC contact either Miss Joy Seddon on 01223 244316 or Mrs Bridget Thompson on 01353 610345. They run the scheme as informally as possible and leave it to the host families and students to make mutually convenient arrangements for a visit. So far as it is possible they try to introduce students to hosts with similar interests.

If their own parents cannot be with them on these occasions they are glad to be able to invite their 'English families' to support them at the Senate House and for celebration lunches.

There are so many small ways we can help the students, with encouragement and better understanding of their problems when their work overwhelms them and they just want a sympathetic friend to talk to. It is important that when they return home to their families and work, they take with them not just another qualification but some good memories of the friendships they have made and a better understanding of our country. We feel enriched by the friendships we have made with some of these young people and enjoy communicating with them by letter or email.

Can I conclude with a paragraph from a letter received last year from a Chinese girl who spent 2002 in Cambridge reading for a Master's degree in Development Studies? She wrote, 'I have been back in Shanghai for three months and have almost geared back to what it used to be. But I miss Cambridge so much, the fresh air, the green grassland, the blue sky and mostly the friendly people.'

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