

# Opportunity

December 2019 • February 2020

**friends**  
INTERNATIONAL



## International Students Top 1 Million!

Sharing Christ with international students in the UK

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# Leading Thoughts

How do you start a meaningful friendship? Of course, a simple hello and a polite chat is good, but an invitation to your home for a meal can be the catalyst for a flourishing friendship. This is exactly what our hosts do with international students right across the country.



Last academic year, we helped connect 450 international students with Christian hosts. A warm welcome and hot meal can be the entry point for international student

ministry, and we have an abundance of stories and tips to share with you.

I know of one such couple who invited eight students over for dinner in early December. They fed them and enjoyed singing carols, giving presents and explaining what Christmas means. Some of the students were from East Asia and had never celebrated Christmas before; they were delighted to experience a British home during the festive period. In this edition of *Opportunity*, read about churches, individuals and students who are hosting and have been hosted. Hearing these stories is uplifting!

Also, in this edition we look at mental health and why it can be specifically challenging for international students (p8). We have a role to play in caring for and supporting our international friends.

Finally, it is important to recognise that without God's leading and providing we don't expect to see fruitful ministry. We are driven to prayer, recognising our inadequacies, knowing that even as we edge towards strategies and effective responses, they are nothing without the filling of God that turns individual hearts to Him.

We know something of what God has done in the past and ask Him to renew his activity among us. Perhaps that starts with learning to recognise what He is already doing and discerning His leading.

*Alan*

**Alan Tower**, Friends International National Director

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**“Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.” Habakkuk 3:2**



News

# Brexit Fears Fail To Deter International Students

The number of international students coming to study in the UK has now topped one million.

New figures show 458,000<sup>1</sup> international students have enrolled at UK universities for the new academic year, and they will be joined by a further 550,000 international students coming to the UK to study English as a foreign language and other short-term courses.

Despite the fears and uncertainty surrounding Brexit, the number of international students enrolling at British universities continues to rise and has doubled since 2001. China accounts for the largest number of international students, 106,000 – while India, USA, Malaysia and Hong Kong also account for significant numbers. Within the eurozone, Italy provides the highest number of international students to the UK [14,000].

Although the UK is an increasingly popular destination, many international students find the experience daunting as they are thrown into a different culture and are isolated from friends and family. Albert, an international student from Hungary, described his experience. “The first month was tough, I had never lived on my own, I didn't know a single person and I couldn't understand the Welsh accent”.

We exist to support students like Albert by arranging and encouraging events and hospitality in one of our 40 local centres across the UK.

During the 2018-19 academic year we had contact with over 10,000 international students to provide them with friendship and the opportunity to explore the Christian faith.

By supporting international students, nations, governments and communities can be influenced for good, not just for now but for generations to come.

**To ensure that this important work can continue, please consider donating via our website: [friendsinternational.uk/give](http://friendsinternational.uk/give)**

<sup>1</sup> <http://hesa.ac.uk>

**During the 2018-19 academic year we had contact with over 10,000 international students.**





"I was amazed that I was welcomed in on Christmas Day, as I am not a Christian. This is your special day for your festival. I don't think my family or parents would invite anyone to come to our feast days."

**Student from Singapore studying in York**



## Hospitality: A Shining Light at Christmas

In the middle of winter, when it is dark and cold, you don't want to be far away from your friends and family. Yet, many international students who are here from distant lands are not able to return home, and therefore spend Christmas in their student accommodation, often alone.

What if Christians opened their doors over the festive period and started welcoming in these students? This is the invitation we're offering through our hosting scheme and we would love for you to be involved.

## Christmas Hosting at All Saints Preston

Winter in the UK is a funny time of year. It's cold, dark and wet – and can sometimes feel very depressing.

Christmas provides a light in the darkness. It does so physically with its countless bright lights, emotionally as something a great many look forward to, and spiritually for those who are followers of the Lord Jesus.

Here at All Saints (a church in Preston) we've been hosting international students on Christmas Day for many years. It can feel like a costly ministry, but as a church we hold four main motivations for doing it.

1. It's a great way to get the wider church family involved in student work as a one-off, especially for those who can't get involved in a week-to-week café, or regular hosting slot.
2. It's often an opportunity to share the good news with students who at other points

in the year show very little interest. We often invite students to church as part of our normal Christmas traditions, and give them gifts that include a Christian tract (in their mother tongue if possible).

3. It is a wonderful step in the journey of 'keen' students as they can have a front row seat to what it looks like for Christians to celebrate faith with one another.
4. Finally, it can be a testimony to unbelieving friends and family, that we would open our home.

We've found our Christmas hosting scheme to be a real blessing to both members of our church family and to the international students we meet!

**Ann-Marie Yow**, International Student Worker, All Saints Preston



Hosting



## From the Students...

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“As an international student, who was new to the UK, I felt a deep sense of isolation. Before Christmas, my isolation increased as a lot of my colleagues and friends went overseas to spend Christmas with their families.

At that time, I was blessed to know a local Christian family, who invited me to join them at Christmas. It was a great opportunity for me to meet more people and to learn about how the British celebrate and spend their time at Christmas.”

Student from Syria

“Like every foreign student, the Christmas atmosphere of a totally strange city caused a heavy attack of homesickness in me, especially when seeing reunion of families. However, my host family got rid of my loneliness with an unforgettable Christmas time. Still imprinted on my mind is the memory of a colourful decorated Christmas tree, the fragrant smell of a roasting turkey and a cosy time with my host family.

In fact, it was the first time I could be totally immersed in a traditional Christmas Day with a British family and everything was absolutely beyond my expectation. We told our stories, shared the Christmas banquet and played games. My most favourite part was the Christmas crackers, which make a snapping sound when pulled and contain a small gift, paper crowns and a joke!

To be honest, many memories of my time spent in Oxford have faded, yet that Christmas Day will be among the happiest memories that I will never forget.”

Student from Vietnam

## From the Hosts...

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“We have hosted international students from all continents over many years. It was 1975 when we started as a newly married couple living in Swansea. It is always exciting to meet and get to know people from different cultures and faiths. All of them have enriched our lives.

Our prime motivation is to share the love of Jesus in whatever way we can. Also, if we imagine ourselves or any of our four children being in a new country, we would like a welcome from local people.”

Mervyn and Ita Currie, Dundee

“It was a privilege for us to host for lunch three very pleasant young men from Pakistan, studying at Bournemouth University. We learnt much from hearing their stories of life and studies. Meeting them helped my wife and I to appreciate more of their world, fostered greater understanding and helped us value both our shared experiences and differences.”

Revd Canon Chris Strain, Poole

“Last Christmas we hosted two Chinese students from Southampton University. As a family we took them out walking in the New Forest before Christmas dinner and we played party games with them in the evening. They were great fun and fitted in very well. One of them wrote afterwards that it was the best Christmas she had had in her life!”

A Friends International Host, Southampton

Hosting



## Become a Friends International Host:

Either speak to your local staff worker for more information or complete our Host Registration form: [connect.friendsinternational.uk/register/host](https://connect.friendsinternational.uk/register/host)



Alessandra, our student blogger, recently wrote about the challenges of mental health as an international student.

Read it here:

**friendsinternational.uk/blog**

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# International Student Mental Health

Statistics suggest that 1 in 4 students suffer from mental health problems.<sup>1</sup>

Factors that might affect a student's mental health are numerous but include: pressure to succeed, loneliness, stress, substance misuse, and an unhealthy lifestyle – late nights, poor diet, etc.

International students can be especially vulnerable. On top of the usual stresses of life, they also face culture shock, a different style of education, and trying to relate and express themselves in a second (or third!) language. Everyday tasks are just that bit more difficult and stressful especially when they have only recently arrived in the UK.

For international students, when things get tough, they are a long way from family and

their usual support structures. The pressure to succeed is magnified when you are the only child, or when sacrifices have been made by the family so you can study overseas. For some, failure is not seen as an option.

In some cultures, mental illness is taboo, and so students either don't recognise the warning signs or, if they do, choose to ignore them because they think asking for help will bring shame. One overseas student in the UK refused to seek help for mental health problems because they were convinced that their illness would be recorded and reported to their parents and sponsor.

## What We Can Do to Help

We must be committed to caring for the whole person and giving generous respect to all cultures.

One important way to maintain a good mental wellbeing is to have genuine connection with the people around you. This is one of the reasons that hospitality and helping to build community and a place to belong is central to what we do. Whether it is an English conversation group, International Café, or Christian study group we seek to provide safe places where relationship blossoms and where issues can be explored without judgement.

We want to encourage all international student workers to be aware and sensitive of student mental health needs. We may notice that a student is 'not quite themselves', or maybe hasn't been around for a few weeks, and that we should attempt to get in touch. Sometimes it's as simple as sitting down over a coffee or a meal and just listening and showing that they are not alone. It's walking the road with them, sharing joy and sorrow, helping them navigate the stressful times.

It is also important that, when needed, we help them access professional help and journey with them on their road to wellbeing.

<sup>1</sup><http://yougov.co.uk>



For more info, visit our website or contact the Affiliates Coordinator, Kah Foon: [kahfoon@friendsinternational.uk](mailto:kahfoon@friendsinternational.uk)



## Get Connected with the Affiliates Network

If you'd like to connect more closely with Friends International as you minister to international students, why not join the Affiliates Network?

Affiliates are invited to regional and national staff training conferences, receive monthly updates on resources and developments, have access to staff-only resources, can email our internal networks (particularly helpful for finding Christian contacts around the world for returning students) and can advertise international student events on the Friends International app and website.

Affiliates commit to engaging positively with Friend International and others doing international student ministry where possible. Affiliates pay a subscription fee of £100/year.

### Church Affiliation

Churches highly engaged with international students might find it helpful to join the Affiliates Network under the church scheme,

enabling them to sponsor 3 individual Affiliates each year. As people move on to different roles, whichever church members are most involved with the international student ministry can receive the stimulation, support and training that comes with being a Friends International Affiliate. Church Affiliation fees are £150/year.

### Outside of the UK and Ireland?

The Affiliates Network also boasts several members based outside the UK and Ireland. International Affiliates are involved in ministry to international students in other parts of the world and appreciate the cross-pollination of ideas. They are also generously committed to helping returnees to their cities settle into churches. International Affiliate fees are £20/year.



## Latest News

10,000 Users



The Friends International app has now had over 10,000 registrations! This means that international students all over the UK are using it to find their local events and activities. Find out more about the app here: [friendsinternational.uk/app](https://friendsinternational.uk/app)



### More Exposure

We are delighted to have been featured on several prominent radio stations and websites in recent months. We have had interviews with BBC Radio and UCB, and articles appear on Christian Today, Evangelical Alliance, and Global Connections websites.

### Word Alive is Coming

Word Alive Conference (April 2020) is not far away! Bursaries are available for international students who wish to attend. Please get in touch for more information. Find out more about Word Alive on their website: [wordaliveevent.org](http://wordaliveevent.org)



### Visa Changes

In September we heard the good news that the government is changing the rules on how long students from overseas can stay in the country after they graduate. In 2012 It was cut down to 4 months, but now it will be put back up to two years. This is significant, especially for students who, after they graduate, wish to join our year-long Reach Programme or any church-based internship programme.



## Prayer Cards

Pray for students from all over the world with these seven cards.

Each card contains facts, quotes and a prayer for students from a specific region of the world.

Get all the cards on our website:

[friendsinternational.uk/welcome](https://friendsinternational.uk/welcome)

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