

# Christmas away from home

Liv Evans investigates life over the holidays for international students.



**Left: bottom right: students staying behind for Christmas**  
**Top right: a Christmas tree**

The majority of us will soon be heading home for the Christmas holidays. I'm already looking forward to leaving the barren Yorkshire wastelands for warmer southern climes. The idea of a house with heating, copious amounts of food and probably a dodgy present or two is all that's getting me through these last two weeks of rain and essay gloom.

However, this is not the case for all. According to the International Student Office, there are roughly 2,100 international students in York (over 20% of the University population), many of whom will be remaining on campus for the vacation.

When most people are celebrating the period of festivity with their families and friends, what is done to support those alone over this difficult time? I spoke to a selection of international students from all years, some who will be remaining behind over the holidays and some who have chosen otherwise.

"I haven't been able to find any information regarding events, welfare or things like catering facilities on campus or shop opening hours. Nobody considers what happens [to the people spending Christmas on campus] as it

doesn't affect them."

Rachel, 19, adds "it's such a festive time of year, yet nothing seems to have been organised. Everything just seems to stop - you think someone would put something on. In theory it's a good opportunity to meet new people, but as I have no idea of who's staying and where they might be, I could just be wandering around campus alone."

It seems that the University does not organise anything for the significant number of its population left on campus. Andrea, 19, hadn't heard if any events were arranged. "There's been no real contact from them, I didn't really consider staying behind." Chen, a Biochemistry student, said that, "they may have sent a few emails but I haven't read them. There isn't any contact about events, only things about accommodation and essays".

A quick search of the University website reveals that details about Christmas activities are sparse. The first result on a search for "students staying over Christmas" reveals a PDF with some potentially useful information. Unfortunately, it relates to the 2006/07 academic year.

The International Student Support

Co-ordinator, Louise Sanders, said that there was no way of knowing how many international students were staying behind for Christmas. "I'm going to send out an information sheet this week letting them know what's going on and who's doing what while they're here." This is the first notice they will receive about the holidays. Do they have any kind of meetings or the like to outline what the holidays here entail? "No."

"On Christmas Day we have an open house for anyone here. Aside from that, what happens over the Christmas holidays varies from year to year depending on what the students of the International Students Association (ISA) choose to do."

But Daria Pawlowska, President of the ISA, stated that "the Christmas holiday is too short for us to really organise anything. We'll have a dinner perhaps on the Sunday after everyone else has gone, but that's it. About 20 or 30 people usually come."

"We don't know how many people stay for the holidays. We can guess that it's mostly Chinese students and others from far away countries, as it would be too far for them to go back. Most committee members don't stay themselves -

only three are staying this year, but they have family coming, so they'll want to do things with them. We don't organise anything for Christmas Day itself, or for New Year."

When asked if it was lonely on campus while the majority of students are away, Tammy, 21, admitted that "it can be very quiet and lonely, especially when I'm the only one in the whole house". A Sri Lankan first-year said he was glad he is able to go home: "I think the second-years are comfortable staying over the holidays, they know the area, but I wouldn't really know what I was doing. I wouldn't really consider spending Christmas here. I'll probably go home for all the vacations." Andrea agreed. "It would be especially lonely as I'm in my first-year. I only live in Geneva so it's not too far away, I feel lucky compared to others."

This is not only the case for first-years. A French postgraduate studying Archeology has gone home every Christmas vacation. "I'm glad I get to go home, I wouldn't want to stay here on my own. My parents would kill me if I didn't come home for the holidays. Students from Europe tend to go home, mostly because we can."

It seems that foreign students have become used to the relative inactivity over the Christmas break. "I haven't been home for the holiday for about four years, so I don't know if I'd prefer that. Apart from doing my work, I'll just be hanging round; there's nothing special to do," commented Tammy.

So what do students do, if there isn't any University or student-organised programme? Tammy will be staying in York over the holidays. "I'm preparing for an assessment to hand in after Christmas, I'll be very busy". A Chinese second-year student, who will also remain here for the three weeks, said that the holidays were too short for her to go home. "I have three exams and an essay due in afterwards, I'm too busy to go home." Biology student Kevin said, "I'm staying in England but I won't be in York for the whole time, I'll be travelling around for a couple of days. But I'll mainly be revising."

It is reported that individual provosts tour their colleges during the holidays to see which students are still resident in their rooms over the break. However, there has been no official confirmation of this.

Nothing is organised centrally and so if students are to take part in any of the traditional Christmas activities, they must organise them on an individual basis. "Most of my friends are staying behind, we normally all stay together," said Chen. "Last year, we went to the Lake District together." But this can lead to segregation. Many home students report that international students tend to group together rather than extending their social circle. The failure of the University to provide adequate events for creating new acquaintances can only exacerbate this situation.

"This is my fourth year, and I normally stay here over the holidays, so I'm used to campus being lonely," Kevin admits.

"Going away would be expensive and I have exams. Would I like to go home? Yes, of course." M