I am very grateful to have had the privilege this summer of being sent by CUDAR to meet members of 5 fantastic alumni groups— the Oxford and Cambridge Society of Bulgaria, Macedonia, the Hellenic Cambridge Alumni Association, the Cambridge Club of Israel, and the Cyprus Cambridge Society— as well as returning to visit my own group at home, the Cambridge Society of West Cheshire and North Wales. Throughout the experience I was welcomed at Freshers’ and Alumni events of varying sizes and formats, as well as by individual members, for which I would like to say thank you. I had a fantastic time, and whilst I learned a lot from the incredible places I visited, it was the people I met who really made the trip something to remember. With this in mind, I am excited to participate in more alumni events in the future, but for now would be keen to share some of my thoughts on how groups could further engage with students and recent graduates.

Members of every group I visited were eager to contact potential new members, but raised the issue of data protection making it difficult. My understanding is that it is challenging for groups to make a personal connection both with students new to the university, as well as graduates living in or moving to their country after finishing at Cambridge. Relying on generic emails disseminated through CUDAR may not be helping to reach all alumni, especially with people quite often moving countries and changing email addresses. For the alumni it does reach, there is still the challenge of making meaningful contact that inspires the recipient to want to engage with the alumni group—which can be difficult to do, with next to no information about the person the invite is sent to with which to do this.

As a current student trying to promote the alumni network, it is apparent from discussing the Travel Award with my peers that many are unaware of what the alumni groups are or what they do; a position I was in myself before investigating this opportunity. Having attended a diverse range of events through the award, I now know that I would feel reasonably comfortable signing myself up to meetings with alumni groups in future, and especially in returning to my home group and people I’m getting to know better in Cheshire. However, it’s only through having attended numerous events that I have built up this confidence, and each time by making the first contact through the Alumni Group page on the CUDAR website. I can appreciate that for potential alumni group members, receiving an email from the head of a society you are unfamiliar with, to an event which even less is known about, is going to be quite daunting to respond to.

The issue with data protection making it challenging for current alumni to reach out to potential members in a personal way has been brought up by previous award winners, so I
assume this is not easy to get around. However, the alumni groups are fantastic organisations which I’m sure many people would love to be a part of, if they were more aware of what was involved. It is not a dissimilar situation to when undergraduates are first accepted to their College, but have to search social media themselves (primarily Facebook and Instagram), to get in touch with actual students and gain a feel for the institution they are joining. This gives them far more information and reassurance than a formal letter or email has the potential to. With this in mind, I believe a simple way of making alumni groups seem more approachable is to ensure their Facebook pages and head of societies profiles’ are easily accessible to potential members, and students are directed to these early on. Preferably the link should be direct so that students and graduates do not feel they had to search around and uncover the information themselves, especially when closed groups are utilised as opposed to open ones. If it is not possible to include specific links to alumni groups’ social media in email introductions, it could be worth making a general suggestion for recipients to search out the groups presence online themselves, as is common knowledge for freshers to do before arriving at University. This makes it easy for alumni to explore what past events entailed, humanises the exchange by putting faces to names, and allows potential members to see that there are lots of people in the same position and that they would not risk being singled out by attending an event.

Whilst it may not be possible for heads of the societies to make personal contact initially, by making it as easy and unintimidating as possible for potential members to get in touch themselves, it may be easier to attract alumni and engage them in dialogue. A couple of short, positive quotes from recent graduates or students who have been in the same position, could be tagged on to the end of introductory emails sent out from groups, to reassure them that attending an event is something their peers are also doing. The Oxford alumni website features photos of many people who have recently joined, and some clever animations to illustrate simply that groups are made up of a diverse mixture of ages and both genders. Cultivating the feeling that society members are people they share common experiences and can identify with, makes it more likely that potential members will attend an event in the first place, and do so in a mindset that increases their chances of making genuine connections with other alumnus.

The use of Facebook groups to organise events is an integral part of this scheme as it allows members to see who else is attending or considering it. For example, occasional updates on the Cambridge Club of Israel’s event at the British Ambassador’s before the evening kept the occasion fresh and exciting in my mind, allowed me to see that many people from a wide variety of backgrounds were also planning on attending, and took some of the anxiety away, as I felt I had a better idea of what was involved.

Getting members to be more proactive about finding information, and making use of social media a more widespread thing, may help groups to organise events initially as well as encouraging people to attend them. Common annual fixtures such as a Christmas meetup or Freshers’ event seem to work well since they are predictable and attract the largest number of members. However when there is more interest, a couple of groups I visited managed to arrange smaller scale, more spontaneous meetups outside of the larger events using social
media, which had a totally different feel to them (for instance, a day at the beach or walk round part of the city). This would be relevant to members of some groups I spoke to who mentioned that in some cases, the regular events had started to feel a bit stagnated, and attendance dropped if they attempted to run events more than once a year following the same template. Particularly in the smaller groups, it seems crucial to have a good following online, so peoples’ availability can be discovered fairly easily and it is possible to arrange meetups within even a matter of days doing something more unusual. This is only possible if members make good use of the social media platform, as the only other alternative is for the arrangements to go through CUDAR’s mailing list, which takes too long and makes these kind of events unfeasible. Arranging events well ahead of time can be difficult in the smaller groups, since members are often located outside of the country, and even those who are not may find it hard to commit due to busy schedules. Therefore, a mixture of predictable, large scale events and smaller, less rigidly structured ones could be helpful to attract members in the first place, but then to keep their interest and keep the function of alumni groups dynamic.

This also enables any member of the group to have an input into activities, which can only be a positive thing when trying to engage different demographics, and takes some of the pressure off of the heads of societies to be responsible for everything. The heads of societies I had the pleasure of communicating with have all been incredibly welcoming and helpful, obviously put a lot of work into running the groups, and are well respected among members. However, getting others more involved in the process seems like one way of increasing participation, and making it feel more like ‘their’ group, rather than one whose events they can attend but are decided by someone in a greater position of authority. There also appears to be a lot of variation between groups in how such leadership positions are decided, which makes sense considering the different composition of groups between countries. With emphasis on the fact that everyone I spoke to was positive about the work of the current heads of societies, it is worth mentioning that in some cases, a more democratic approach to deciding positions within the group could be valuable. Having more of a contribution to the direction of the group would help members to feel their input is appreciated, and this could increase participation and the scope of what groups are able to achieve. Whether there should be a limit implemented as to how long one person should be able to have responsibility for a society is a separate issue; although at least in the larger groups, this could make the process of other members stating their interest easier if they so desired. In some cases it seems there genuinely are a lack of people willing to take on the role, in which case it makes sense to keep current heads who are doing an excellent job. It may just be beneficial not to assume this is the case.

Continuing with the theme of communication, a couple of the smaller societies expressed an interest in running joint events with neighbouring countries, which is an intriguing prospect offering potential for more alumni to meet and exchange ideas, and help attendance, especially since in these cases many members have to travel to meet anyway. The concept of being part of an international alumni network as a whole, as well as a national or collegiate group, is an exciting one which personally I have been fortunate to feel very much a part of through this experience. Since the basis of the alumni groups is
people coming together with a shared experience and sense of belonging from time spent at Oxbridge, it seems reasonable to expect that the same attitude would be reflected across borders. Unless I’ve missed the point, it would be nice to think that the same invitation would be extended to Oxbridge alumni regardless of nationality. It’s not my place to comment on the politics of the places I’ve been lucky enough to visit. Yet I’d like to believe that as ambassadors of two fantastic universities, and supposedly some of the most forward thinking and intelligent people out there, it would be a shame for conflict that is not particularly related to the alumni network to prevent likeminded individuals from cooperating, and perhaps even setting an example for the rest of the country.

To conclude, I had a fantastic time meeting alumni from all groups. I feel very lucky, not only to have been offered the opportunity to participate in the award, but also by how warmly I was received by the societies everywhere I visited. I would encourage students to get in contact with their local alumni groups, at whatever stage of their degree, as they are an excellent resource, and constitute an engaging overall community which I am proud to be a part of. I hope my suggestions could help alumni groups which are already doing an admirable job, to perhaps further engage students and recent graduates in the alumni network, so that fewer people run the risk of missing out on what is an invaluable opportunity.