Student Travel Award 2016

Benjamin Williams

During my travels I visited five of the European alumni groups:

- The Danish and Swedish Cambridge Alumni Group
- The Oxford and Cambridge Society of Hamburg
- The German Cambridge Society
- The Oxford and Cambridge Alumni Society, Czech Republic
- The Oxford and Cambridge Club of Zurich

With each of these, the people I met were incredibly welcoming and the general response very positive. The type of meetings in each city also varied, and this reflected the dynamic of the groups. Before applying to the award scheme my impressions were that each visit would involve large meetings with the group in each city. Going purely from the blogs of last year’s students, this would be in the evening (as this is when most people are available) and could be one or two instances at each destination. My actual experience was very different to this, once again reflecting the dynamic of the groups. It was nonetheless a very positive one!

The first place I visited was Copenhagen, where I stayed for three nights. There I had arranged to meet four alumni, each individually. Contacting alumni in Copenhagen had been more difficult than anticipated, as the main contact for the group was unfortunately not available while I was there. The group itself is relatively inactive. Consequently those I did contact were actually through the college development offices of Clare and St Johns (who were incredibly helpful, so worth contacting in future!). A well-defined setup would have a good impact, particularly as those I met did not realise that an alumni group existed in Denmark – engaging with potential students would be quite easy, as all of those I met either worked at the university in Copenhagen or for high profile firms (where school pupils are likely to do work experience). Engaging current students is more difficult, as it is much less likely there will be direct contact between them and alumni. The best way for contact is undoubtedly for course subject, as this is where people will have much in common and advice can be shared about careers (as well as seeing what life is like after your degree).

More generally, the best attended events were talks or presentations given by alumni (or by alumni contacts) who are experienced in their field. They also have a social aspect to them, in meeting other attendees and often going for a drink or just staying behind for a little while afterwards. The talks promote discussion and act more as a forum for people to share their views – I think this is much more attractive for many, as going to a meal or drinks event they are unsure of who they will meet and the kind of group they will be attending.

The Zürich alumni group is a model example of where a range of events is used well. To get to this stage has required a lot of work from Rebekka Greminger, who runs the group, but this has been rewarded – now the structure and precedent for events is there, other members run individual events (such as boat cruises on the lake, trips to CERN in Geneva). Added to the hikes and other cultural visits, the result is that there is something to cater for everyone. The demographic of the Zürich group is younger than the others I visited, largely for this reason. The key is the way the group has been built up over the years, slowly adding more to the calendar and bringing more and more people in (emphasised by the way the mailing list has grown, to such an extent that the drinks event I attended was fully booked for forty, despite being arranged only a week before it happened).
One thing I am now set on is living and working abroad, even if only for a year. Although there are foreign exchanges in some subjects (such as going through the Erasmus scheme), without committing to a year it is difficult to gain information about working abroad. Previously it is something that I would have definitely not been against, but would equally have not aimed for – having met so many alumni, who were all so encouraging about living abroad (if anything, to enrich and broaden your perspective about the world around you), I think passing on this enthusiasm to current students is absolutely worthwhile.

An effort has been made by Soha El Agouz, who runs the Hamburg group, to get a venue that acts as a focus for events. In her case it consists of a café that she and her husband Clemens have recently set up. Having somewhere like this to host talks and meetings makes organising them much easier and is therefore very valuable (as it means events are more likely to happen). I’d imagine that particularly with the larger groups, there will always be somewhere either close to everyone or with a link to one of the members that could serve this purpose.

Soha informed me of the situation with the German Cambridge Society, where many members are unhappy with how the society is run and smaller groups are being started up in Germany. Although I could understand where they are coming from, it also seemed so unnecessary to allow politics to enter what is really a society for discussion and socialising. The Czech and Zürich groups were exceptionally good at keeping the atmosphere relaxed and recognise that the main attraction for many is the chance to meet other intellectually minded people with something in common. Pushing this image to recent graduates and also to current students (particularly where international students may be able to get in contact with a group close to them) is crucial to expanding the alumni network and making it more inclusive for all. The (completely incorrect) stereotype is of old boys’ clubs that aren’t really for recent graduates and to break down this barrier would help massively – even though there are many younger members in all the groups, participation could definitely be higher.

When I visited the Prague group I was able to get in contact with various alumni because Marketa, who runs the group, sends out a regular newsletter and could put my arrival in it. While I know that over the mailing lists communication is very good across the groups, a regular newsletter such as this is brilliant – it gets a lot of information to individuals, but crucially helps maintain structure and means people are more likely to flick through until something catches their eye (achieving what multiple emails may do for multiple events). Yet again, it makes organising simpler and gets more people involved.

The German Cambridge group, based in Berlin, also hosts regular events. It has suffered from aforementioned internal issues, but generally operates very well. Where it could improve is recruiting recent graduates. For these and for current students, social media is the best way to get in contact and to let them know about any events. None of the groups I visited had a large presence on Facebook, Twitter etc. and relied mainly on mailing lists – using both in tandem, where a Facebook event can be easily updated to let attendees know of any changes and importantly shows who is going along (rather than members being unsure of the scale of the event and of others attending), would get the information across to the widest range of people. Even on LinkedIn, the ability to see who is attending puts a few friendly faces to the group and humanises it to potential members.

The alumni relations website gives information about each of the alumni groups, as well as the main contact for each. Having some way to add themselves to a mailing list or to a group on social media is an easy way to involve more graduates – from what I saw, alumni tend to get involved soon after leaving Cambridge or a lot further on in their careers when they feel more separated from the
University, whereas the time in between there is less desire to get in contact. It is therefore crucial that if diversity is to be maintained in the alumni groups, graduates should be added at an early stage.

This could be helped by making students more aware of the alumni groups during their time at Cambridge. I had very little knowledge of them before looking at the Student Travel Award and for most of this year life after the undergraduate stage seemed like a long way away. Now though it’s great to know how much is out there. One idea that could create links would be to work with the international student societies (Such as the French society, the Spanish society etc.) and get them involved with their respective counterpart alumni groups. Many alumni would value that contact in Cambridge and I believe the students would gain a huge amount from those with more experience in a particular field and working in their home country.

Liaising with the college development and alumni offices throughout Cambridge would be a great help in promoting this communication. Students I think feel more of a direct affiliation to their college rather than just to the overall university, and this is a link most will want to preserve and cherish. In addition, colleges have the details of individuals rather than groups – making use of both contact methods is the best way to share information and bring alumni together.

For the Student Travel Award 2017 I’d definitely encourage contacting the groups as early as possible – any difficulties I had contacting people were mainly due to not much time to do it in (but the fault was entirely mine for the timing of the trip). I think late August/September is the best time to do the trip, as it is when most alumni are around and coincides with welcome to Cambridge events. This makes it far more likely that the trip can be arranged to coincide with a large group event. From the Alumni Groups Leadership Conference 2016 I came across a list of events that have been run and are planned for many groups in various countries - I think it would be very useful for next year’s award winners to have access to something like this, even just to get a better idea of when is best to travel.

The main concerns I had before the trip were safety, finance and just keeping on top of the different commitments – meeting everyone, updating the blog and getting enough sleep! Safety was something I surprisingly didn’t have to think about at all – I stayed predominantly in Youth hostels, then with Soha and her family in Hamburg. Whether large or small, as long as you are critical about the hostels to stay in (the ratings on the Hostelworld website are an excellent guide) then there should not be any issues. Checking the location is always worthwhile, but I was never far from the city centre and therefore even late at night there were always enough people around to not feel isolated. Youth hostels helped hugely to keep costs down, and supporting this with the use of supermarkets to buy breakfast and occasionally lunch is a good idea. In addition most major cities often have a transport pass valid for 24 or 72 hours. These are very convenient and much cheaper than buying individual single tickets, but nonetheless it is worth asking an alumni contact for their advice on the matter.

Meeting everyone should also not be a source of anxiety, as the location that works best for the travel award students (for me in the city centre) works well for the alumni group too. I kept track of my itinerary each day (including travel connections, new accommodation) using a notebook and checked everything, particularly directions, the night before. Updating a blog, Facebook page and a daily Instagram feed requires self-motivation, but setting aside a time each day to do this is a simple way to ensure it gets done.
The one issue I faced on two occasions was tiredness. Fiona had warned me about this from her experiences, so I’ll reiterate her advice. When you are away on your own, there is no-one to look out for you all the time (but everyone you meet will do it along the way), but more importantly there is no-one to slow you down. It is therefore crucial to take breaks and make sure you get enough sleep – with everything going on and so much to see, stopping seems like the last thing on your mind. In the long term though, making sure you don’t go overboard absolutely crucial.

All that is left to say is thank you! I had a fantastic trip and met so many incredibly interesting people. Sitting at my laptop seems quite strange after the last few weeks, but I enjoyed every moment.