

Conference of Catholic Chaplains in Higher Education in England and Wales



The Care of International Students in England and Wales

June 2013

The Conference of Catholic Chaplains in Higher Education in England and Wales is a network rather than a centrally administered organisation, and its function is to support and advise Catholic Higher Education Chaplains in their ministry. This is mostly done through the organisation of a yearly conference and twice yearly regional meetings, but also through collaboration and advocacy with the Catholic Bishops Conference in England and Wales and with ecumenical partners, particularly the Churches Higher Education Liaison Group (CHELG). Our Bishop President is Bishop Peter Doyle from Northampton, and our National Coordinator (on whose behalf I am here) is Mrs Roberta Canning.

In England and Wales there is no specific agency that ministers exclusively to international students, but overseas students are fully integrated in our university and college chaplaincies. In most Catholic chaplaincies, they make up a very high proportion of our communities. (In Reading, where I am chaplain, they would make up for 60-70 per cent of our mass attendance.) The care of international students tends therefore to be high on the agenda of most University Chaplains.

Catholic Chaplaincies operate independently of one another within their diocesan frameworks, and their shape and size can vary widely. Some chaplains are welcomed by universities and are very active on campus, others work from nearby Catholic chaplaincies; some do both. Some chaplaincies also provide accommodation for both British and international students, (for instance in Bangor, Birmingham Brighton and Sussex, Derby, Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield etc.) This can involve from just a handful of students to a maximum of about 60 in the case of Newman House and More House in London.

Most chaplaincies operate on a tight budget and provide spiritual and emotional support, simple hospitality and opportunities for growth in theological knowledge and understanding of the Faith and of the Word of God. However, many chaplains are often approached by international students in material hardship, and we try to support them either on an ad-hoc basis or by helping them access support services in the University or in the local community.

One particular project CCCHE has been involved in during this year is the organisation, together with CHELG, of an ecumenical study day on the Pastoral Needs of International Students, particularly those from China and from Africa. This study day was held on 8 November 2012 and the speakers were Dr John Scott speaking about Chinese students and Dr Robert Kaggwa MAfr, Catholic Chaplain at the University of Roehampton, speaking about African Students.

Summary of the Study Day on African and Chinese Students

There is huge diversity among international students and even with a national group like Chinese or Nigerian students there will be considerable cultural variation. They should not be seen as a problem and the student services director argued that it is good to include them in general student activities and care rather than as a separate group. A number have poor English communication skills and some find the secularism and behaviour in English society hard to understand. Some will struggle with the amount of independent study expected of them. Some will enjoy the freedom to reinvent themselves. Some will have unacknowledged mental health problems which will be intensified by coming to a strange country.

There are 4 strategies which international students tend to adopt:

- *Assimilation* when the student uproots completely from their background,
- *Integration* but retaining contact with roots
- *Traditionalism*, when the student spends quite a lot of time with others from their cultural background
- *Isolation* when they retreat into that culture and barely engage with their new environment

The healthiest strategies are integration and traditionalism and this suggests that students both need to link in to others from their own culture, and to be able to connect with the mainstream in the university and society. The role for chaplaincy here is obvious.

China is more like a continent; students from Taiwan, Singapore or Hong Kong are very different from mainland Chinese but so again are students from Shanghai and Guangdong and those close to Taiwan because they can often access broadcast media from beyond the borders. Christianity can seem exciting or exotic. Some students have Christian grandparents who have suggested they seek baptism over here. Many are six to one young people - only children of only children so the focus of the hopes and expectations of six adults, so there's pressure.

The best students stay in China, the next good go to US and the UK is third choice. Many don't want to be here, don't like it here, have lost their secure identity and status, they've been kicked out of the best to experience a lower standard of living. Their English skills are not what they had thought and university is not what they expected. There are very varied levels of wealth among Chinese students and social pressure within the student community. They fear loss of Face.

Chinese students may find it difficult to cope with the variety of opinion in the public sphere. Some have an anti-western "Opium War" mentality. Many have suppressed rage and disappointment but will not express it to outsiders. Since many have non-graduate parents, they can be doubly distanced from their parents. They have an undeveloped understanding of mental health issues and will find it hard to ask for help and not understand what counselling is for (or indeed what chaplains are for). Since they find it hard to ask for help, it can be better to accompany a student to make an appointment with counselling or medical services

Robert Kaggwa led the session on **African students** and emphasised the variety and diversity of cultures. There are often many languages within one country; many students have financial problems, when scholarships are not adequate. Some romanticise the West before they come and are disappointed. They have to adapt from a poor country to a wealthy one, a religious culture to a secular one and a communitarian culture to individualism and independence.

Many international students find the English superficially friendly and polite but not genuinely welcoming. Anxiety in the face of difference makes them more aware of their own culture. Aspects of home student culture - like drunkenness and skipping lectures can be a shock. However it can be liberating to experience the reality of life in England. Religious activity often intensifies as they move from practice to commitment and gain a sense of rootedness and commitment and they may seek a church that is culturally familiar. There is a tension between integration and separateness. Some may find chaplaincy worship too cold.

In summary, hospitality is very important, but it needs to be genuine and sustained to convey a sense of belonging, and of welcome into a community to which they can belong, rather than see themselves as guests expected to leave! International students should be seen as an enrichment of our university and chaplaincy lives - "the other is not a problem to be solved"