

## **The Changing Emotions of a Christmas Break**

Coming up on my third University Christmas, I've been reflecting on the time spent here and what limited time I still have to come. Each term I'll pack my car or a small suitcase for the train and travel all day South, eventually getting home on the other side of the country. Every time I complete this journey, I feel like a slightly altered version of myself, having experienced more within my sheltered existence here. I feel as though going from being a Fresher, to the excitement of second year and finally the self-pity of being in my final year has reflected in my feelings towards returning home for Christmas, and I wish to discuss them here.

In my first year, the hope and excitement for what was to come in this new stage of life was exhilarating. We made Christmas dinners, exchanged many gifts, and thanked each other for a great first term. I remember wanting to get home and see my family again, despite the fun of unsupervised adulting. As the break approached, I remember feeling content, despite all the change around me. There was confidence in my belonging, after years of going without. With lack of serious work, the emphasis was on fun, and fun we had, with stupid drinking games, constant walks around the mound and pointless late-night chats. The photos of flat posh-dressed dinners are warming to think of and considering the COVID restrictions in place and to come, the first Christmas of my University life was the one I savoured the most. That Christmas break was interrupted by the announcement of students being expected to stay home for the second term, leaving feelings of isolation and academic inadequacy to skyrocket. I hated that term. My grades were okay, nothing special, and even if it was first year, that compounded the anxiety of uni. It was not seeing the people I'd grown so fond of that was the worst part. Although we had regular zooms and events, it wasn't the same and we all knew it. The only damper on the first year Christmas break for me was the fact it didn't seem to end until April.

Second year was slightly different for me, with the deepening of bonds and partings with others. My best friend was a stranger before Frepping, and the Christmas fun we had before I went home was so enjoyable. This year was different for work, everything mattering more, and the strain put on us by the department seemed to be just about manageable with cuts to some socialising. I didn't enjoy being home as much, having to work for a lot of it, whilst having summatives to complete, this was less of a holiday at home and more of a change of work location. I'm not sure how common this was but I felt more assured in friendships, not needing the fast-paced pressures of first year to keep everyone together, as we now truly found people we wanted to spend time with. We'd learned our mistakes and the group Christmas dinner was much better (even if I did slightly overcook the vegetarian options). I think Christmas in second year has its pros and cons compared to first year but is generally a more mixed bag when it comes to reminiscing. Looking back on times and events always tampers with the associated feelings, but I do believe that it was a welcome change to the proper University experience.

Coming up to my third Christmas break and I'm feeling slightly apprehensive, as always, to leave Durham and go home. I'll miss everything about being here, the people, the activities and experiences that will stay with me forever. But I will be glad to get home and attempt to give myself some time off from work. It's been a step up this year and to now have a chance

after these months to not feel the pressure of uni is a godsend. I'm not sure how universal this will be, but I feel the most tired I have been since beginning at Durham, physically and academically. Even with the strides further into subjects and academia, and the future possibilities that come with that, I'm finding it harder to continue spinning all the plates. I'll be glad for a sleep with my dog when I'm home, as I'm sure many others will be.

I don't mean to sound pitiful, or worry any future third years, but simply wish to delve into how feelings towards University and time away from Durham can change. If you're not happy now, or feel the pressure is becoming too much, please know that won't last and you have every opportunity to speak up. Christmas can be hard for anyone, and you never know what may be occurring in someone's life, so please check on your friends this Christmas break, I'm sure they'll appreciate you.

***By James Lawrence***