

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PROGRAM PARTICIPANT COMMENTS MICHAELMAS 2019

Karen Guo '20, Engineering, Michaelmas Term/St. Catharine's College

This past month in Cambridge has been a rollercoaster of emotions, interactions, and events. Upon coming to a new school and a new country I felt overwhelmed and intimidated by how much there is to do and how many people there are to meet – I've met someone new nearly every day through college, societies, and lectures. But after getting over these initial fears and uncertainties, I am really excited to take on the rest of my term here and continue to experience something new every day.

The city of Cambridge is a beautiful college town with cobblestone alleys through historic buildings, bridges overlooking the River Cam, and paths lined with trees that turn hues of yellow and red during the Michaelmas term. The town is always bustling due to the large student population, and there are lots of shops, restaurants, bars, and clubs to frequent. The university is composed of different colleges, each one with their own residential site and set of social activities – as a regular student you apply to the college before you come, but as an exchange you get placed in a college after being designated by the Study Abroad Committee for Cambridge. Academically, study abroad has been a great opportunity to learn about specific topics within my discipline without the pressure of being on grades. My favorite class I'm currently taking is an Environmental Sustainability & Business class that discusses what businesses can do to curb their contributions to climate change.

On a typical day I'll wake up early for a 9 am lecture or 7 am Badminton practice (I joined the university team here, there are opportunities to join a bunch of different sports on both the university and intercollegiate level whether you have experience or not). I was never an early riser at Caltech, but I've really enjoyed having productive mornings here! Then I'll usually grab lunch with a friend in the town – there are so many restaurants I want to try before I leave – and afterwards find a coffee shop or go to my department library to work. For dinner, I'll cook or eat in the college hall before embarking on nightly activities – since Cambridge students have a pretty packed lecture/practical schedule during the day, a lot of the club and social events happen at night. Some possible activities include a taster session for a new activity such as boxing or ballroom dancing, a formal dinner at another college, or a show at the university's performing arts theatre.

Furthermore, Michaelmas is a great term to be at Cambridge, and I'm really glad I was able to go then. Since it's the start of the year, it's much easier to join societies and sports, you're able to meet all the fresher's and other exchange students through fresher's week, the weather is nice (relative to winter in Lent) and autumn is beautiful, and students are as a whole more excited to meet new people and relaxed since it's still far away from the exam period. There also seem to be a lot of cool holiday events such as Christmas markets and festive music concerts.

One of my favorite things about Cambridge is that I've found a collection of friend groups from diverse common interests. At Caltech, it's easy to feel like all your friends know each other and there aren't many people left to meet, but here I have made some friends through Badminton, some through Fresher's week, some through Engineering, my college family, and of course the other Caltech students who I've had so much fun getting to know. Additionally, I've had so

many new experiences that I definitely wouldn't be able to experience at Caltech – day trips to London, extravagant college formals, and fun themed club nights. I'm having a lot of fun and can't wait to see what I get to do in the last half of this term!

Tanvi Gupta '20, Computer Science, Michaelmas Term/Corpus Christi College

Living in and studying at Cambridge has been a wonderful experience for me so far. I'm new enough to Britain to feel no remorse about seeking out the traditional tourist sights, but I've settled in quickly enough that attending "uni" here feels like old hat. This is helped by the fact that Cambridge is such a college town – the town and its markets blend in with the university buildings, and 1/6th of the population is actually Cambridge students. The city itself is astoundingly beautiful, with centuries-old architecture, cobblestone roads, and stretches of green land along the river Cam. Just walking around here is enough to make one feel a sense of peace.

The university's college system, rather like Caltech's own house system, has been very helpful in making me feel at home. Corpus Christi ("Corpus") is one of the smallest Cambridge colleges (250 undergrads and 200 grad students), which lends it a sense of familiarity I appreciate. The small size (compared to the largest colleges that can over 600+ students) also allows us a prime location in the geographic heart of Cambridge, with easy access to many of the other colleges and most markets. I usually have dinners with friends from college, work with them in the college library, and go out to the popular clubs (Cindies and Lola's are student favorites) together on weekends. The Corpus grounds itself are over 600 years old, and include what is claimed to be the longest constantly-used courtyard in the world (aptly named "Old Court"). The sense of history and tradition that pervades throughout, from the famed Corpus silver to the porters at the college gates, can be extremely humbling. It's hard to resist the urge to document every single moment while doing something as mundane as walking to buy groceries – neon shop fronts blend with Gothic architecture, which transitions seamlessly back to pastel teashop awnings. Even a full three years here might not be enough to learn about the countless stories that contribute to the Cambridge heritage, but places such as the Fitzwilliam Museum and the many college grounds are a good start for my three months.

I would highly recommend attending Cambridge during Michaelmas term. I was able to meet all the incoming freshers during fresher's week, attend the formal matriculation ceremony (and wear our college gown for the matriculation picture!), and ease into college life with other first-timers. I imagine introducing myself to everyone during Lent term would have been significantly more challenging. In addition, Michaelmas hosts the annual societies fair, which is a good way to join an overwhelming number of clubs and find new things to try out. Most of the clubs will have taster sessions to introduce you to their activities, which is a nice to make friends outside college. Of course, Michaelmas also has the advantage of having better weather than Lent, though the biting winds and nearly constant drizzle might convince you otherwise.

Academically, the Part II Computer Science coursework I'm taking is very engaging, and I've gotten the chance to take specialized topics that complement the classes I took at Caltech. The lecturers are generally excellent, and the supervision system allows us to get face time with professors or graduate students who are highly knowledgeable in the field. Usually, we're assigned problem sets to do in preparation for the supervision, which I've found to be challenging, but not overwhelming. Since the computer department conducts an average of four supervisions for eight weeks of lectures, this translates to three to five problem sets per

class. Even though the sets can be long, I really appreciate the freedom to plan out my own work and take in the material at a measured pace. I've noticed this to be a unique perk of studying at Cambridge – since there isn't as much formally assigned work, students have the time and inclination to absorb the material at a pace more suited to them, which makes for good engagement during supervisions. In place of supervisions, some of the more applied computer science classes have practicals, which are led by professors and encourage us to write mini-reports (good practice for writing papers).

One of the best things about my time here has been that the more self-paced work has allowed me to participate in clubs and pursue non-academic interests more regularly. I've been able to get back to tennis and Model UN through their excellent societies, and have also had the time to explore various forms of dance and theatre. The vibrant and likely unique arts culture at Cambridge has been one of the highlights of my time here – there are concerts, shows, and choir services to attend every day. The standard of the pieces is astonishing – just this week I saw a performance of Twelfth Night that had been reworked to include social commentary from a 21st century viewpoint, yet managed to remain true to the dialogue from the original. More generally, the cafes, restaurants, shops, and even street performers make a casual afternoon stroll endlessly entertaining. You could never be bored at Cambridge. If one afternoon you find that you are, London and the beautiful British countryside are short train rides away.

Cliché as it may sound, the defining part of my Cambridge experience has to be my fellow students. Even a regular dinner of a med student) to the medieval design choices visible in our college dining hall (from a history of art student). The sheer variety of subjects that people are studying and happy to share their expertise about amazes me constantly, and makes Cambridge the most intellectually enriching place I've been to. I've had an excellent first month here, and would really encourage anyone interested to seriously consider applying!

Emma Qian '19, Computer Science, Michaelmas Term/Corpus Christi College

Cambridge is a beautiful town steeped in history and traditions. I live right next to the Eagle, the pub where Watson and Crick first announced their discovery of the structure of DNA, as well as the United Kingdom's oldest continuously inhabited courtyard, which dates back to the 14th century. Wandering around Cambridge feels like walking through a museum exhibition. Even though the walks to my lectures take half an hour, they never feel long because of the stunning views of the ancient architecture and the scenic natural landscape along the route.

The academic structure of Cambridge University is quite different from Caltech's. Most classes have supervisions and an exam at the end of the year, and we are given problem sets to complete before each supervision; however, the problem sets are ungraded and are meant to help us determine whether we fully understand the lecture materials. A supervision is essentially a discussion between the supervisor and a small group of students, and its format can differ depending on the supervisor. One of my supervisors discusses each problem from the set and uses any remaining time to work on more example problems, while another supervisor only goes over problems we are unsure about and spends most of the supervision on discussing lecture topics. Regardless of their teaching styles, the supervisors I have are all very knowledgeable and willing to help; recently, one of my supervisors stayed an extra hour to finish answering all our questions in detail. We are always encouraged to ask for help if there are any problems or lecture topics that we are unsure about. Supervisions are unique to Cambridge and offer a great learning opportunity.

Although Cambridge is a much larger university than Caltech, there are many mechanisms in place to ensure students feel supported. Each student belongs to one of thirty-one colleges, providing everyone with a close-knit community similar to the houses at Caltech. Michaelmas is a great time to study at Cambridge because we arrive at the same time as the freshers, and the initial social events organized by colleges are naturally conducive to forming new friendships. Since the Freshers' Fair takes place during Michaelmas, I also had the opportunity to learn about the diverse clubs and societies at Cambridge. Many clubs and societies offer a few taster sessions during Michaelmas; so I tried several different types of organizations before deciding on which ones to commit to. Clubs and societies generally have weekly meetings along with occasional events ranging from casual gatherings like pub socials to large events like boat parties or masquerade balls. I have found joining clubs and societies to be a great way to make friends with people outside of my college and subject. Cambridge also has a variety of university-level and college-level sports teams, many of which are beginner-friendly. I joined a university-level sports team, which allows me to stay physically active and meet great people along the way.

One of my favorite aspects of Cambridge is that I have the chance to meet people who have completely different experiences and interests than me. Around half of the people I meet outside of my computer science classes are not studying STEM, which is a huge change from the Caltech environment. It's quite inspiring to hear about different people's perspectives and aspirations. Cambridge students also seem to be intellectually curious and are keen to engage in discussions. In fact, my first college family dinner somehow turned into a four-hour conversation about everything ranging from current events to the concept of human connection.

I love my experience in Cambridge so far, and I am glad that I still have some time to continue exploring. Academically, the lecture materials at Cambridge are challenging and interesting, but still leave me enough free time, and supervisions are great for testing my understanding of the concepts. Socially, there are always countless things to do and events to attend, ranging from ADC shows and concerts, to pubs and clubs, to day trips to nearby cities. There is never a dull moment, especially during the weekends. Studying in a foreign country and university may seem daunting, but I would highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in trying something new.

Zhengyuan "John" Shang '21, Math, Cambridge Michaelmas/Pembroke College

The past four weeks at Cambridge have been an amazing experience for me. I came with little knowledge about British culture other than "pants" vs "trousers", yet I am enjoying my time here now. I would recommend the opportunity to anyone who wants some adventure outside the Caltech bubble.

Michaelmas term is an awesome time to be here. Fresher's Week offers the best chance to make friends with people in your college. There are quite a lot of people from other European countries studying at Cambridge, which is probably not the case in the US. I have met other freshers from France, Spain, Norway, German, Hungary, and it is nice to learn about their cultures. Even UK students come from various backgrounds. I was quite shocked that there are so many variations of British accents. The Ents, or entertainments, were quite intense at Pembroke. People just went clubbing for eight days straight. I was there for the first two nights, but I just got tired afterward — lol. I have been to four of five clubs now, and I think Fez is the best followed by Vinyl. (If you are not 21 yet, take the chance as the drinking age in the UK is

18!!!) The Fresher's fair is the time to join various societies and meet with people from other colleges. Many of them offer free taster sessions at the start of the school year, and it is worthwhile to check out some of them. I think most colleges have their rowing teams and it is indeed an exciting sport. If rowing sounds too intense, punting is a great alternative. It is kind of hard at first, but once you get the hang of it, it becomes much simpler. You should probably try in the first weeks of October though, as it gets much colder later on.

The first two weeks at Cambridge were not busy at all, but as soon as the third week started when the example sheets were due, life became much harder. So please try to make the most of the first few days. The Centre for Mathematical Sciences is a lovely place to read and study, but it is quite far away from the center of the town (~30 mins walk from Pembroke, one of the most southerly colleges). A bike is not necessary, though. I think the traffic here is maybe too dangerous for bikes, and I quite enjoy the walk to CMS. (There is Queen's, King's, and St John Play Fields along the way). The academic atmosphere at Cambridge is much more intense than Caltech, partly due to the "decide-everything" tripos at the end of the year. People would not collaborate on any homework at all. For example, the math Ph.D. program here only admits people with firsts (sometimes only the top 10). People with firsts could choose their dorms first, get better supervisors, etc. Nonetheless, I find the competition here more like a motivation for one to do better. I am taking four Part II maths courses and auditing two Part III courses right now, and I think it is a pretty manageable workload. Most of the professors here are great lecturers and you can probably find notes from previous years available. The supervisions are helpful, but maybe not to a great extent. People usually walk in with only one or two unsolved problems, and the supervisor would offer tips on those and maybe review some course material. The next few weeks will likely be similar to the routine at Caltech, with sets and more sets, but I am sure you will not regret coming here.

Qiyao "Vivian" Yu '21 Mathematics, Cambridge Michaelmas, St. John's College

Going on the study abroad program is one of the most informed decisions I have made. As an applicant, it is really important to understand the social and academic aspects of the program thoroughly instead of just focusing on the "concept" of living in a different country. Since I have done my research on my college and my subject, I did not experience too much of a "shock" when I arrived, apart from that coming from the size of the college itself.

St. John's college, with its rich history and elegant architecture, is a great place to study and live. The accommodation I have is spacious and clean, with a beautiful view of the court. It is also very quiet, conducive to studying. The library is beautiful, bearing a view of both the Chapel court and the St. John's Chapel. However, seats are limited. The buttery serves 3 meals a day with great varieties and very affordable price, except for Sunday. It is really important to remember to store your own breakfast for Sunday. The local supermarket, Sainsbury's, is only a 5-minute-walk from the college, which is extremely convenient, even at late hours. There are also pharmacies and clinics nearby. Unlike Caltech, almost everything you need, even restaurants, are within reasonable walking distance.

The Michaelmas term is a great time to join Cambridge for both social and academic reasons. I attended matriculation with the rest of the freshers and thereby obtained a lifelong college membership that even allows you to get married in the magnificent Chapel. (Note that Lent Term students also get an official college lifelong membership.) I benefited a lot from Fresher's week orientation in terms of making friends and accessing useful information. I would

recommend going to almost all orientation events just to explore possibilities in different friend groups. One of the most exciting things among the orientation activities is the societies' fair, where different societies at Cambridge recruit new members. Due to the amazing variety of the societies, it was really easy for me to find societies in which I can either explore new interests or continue with old ones. Although I was not a sports person at Caltech, I joined St. John's rowing team and Women's Rugby. Surprisingly, both clubs are very flexible with commitments, which is novice-friendly.

Academically, speaking from my own subject, Cambridge is extremely different from Caltech. Even though most of my friends at Cambridge deny it, the studying culture is more individualistic than collaborative. For mathematics, it is very rare that local students collaborate on problem sets. The supervisions are the allocated time for peers to discuss problems and concepts with the supervisors, usually a grad student or a fellow (faculty member). The supervisions will only be useful given that I have done enough work on my own. These supervisions can also be used as "office hours" for materials covered in class, as there are usually no official office hours offered by lecturers.

In conclusion, I have really enjoyed the past few weeks at Cambridge. I believe the key is to explore and embrace differences, instead of avoiding and judging them. It is also important to bear realistic expectations on social and academic commitments and allocate time wisely, as there are always so many interesting events going on.