

International Christmas Guest: Supporting International Students through Local Civic Engagement

Studierendenwerk Hamburg – Diverse services for students*



Campus food
services

12 canteens
19 cafés
2 pizzerias



Accommodation

25 student residences
4400 bed spaces



Social &
International Affairs

4 childcare centres
367 places
Social consultations office (more
than 2400 consultations in 2025)



Student funding

* 72,000 students from 8 universities & HEIs

Project Context & Inducement

- International students oftentimes stay in the city over Christmas (while most fellow German students leave to visit their families)
- Dormitories partially empty, limited social contact
- Loneliness and disconnection as recurring challenges

(2026 study by Techniker Krankenkasse – one of the biggest German public health insurance providers: loneliness as issue for 25 % of students overall, 43 % of students living in student dormitories)

Project Formation

- Core idea: Bring together international students and local hosts for Christmas
- Low-threshold and voluntary participation for both sides
- Personal encounters as central approach to foster belonging
- Mutual cultural exchange (rather than one-sided support)

➡ *Started in 2014, carried out annually*

Project Flow

● *Early November:*

Outreach and registration

● *Ongoing:*

Rolling matching process

● *Early to mid-December:*

Preliminary introduction meeting event

● *Holidays:*

Christmas visits

● *January:*

post-meeting, feedback

How it works

- Separate registrations for hosts and students
- Collection of preferences & requirements: time, language, food, expectations, etc.
- Careful, manual matching of participants
- Preliminary introduction meeting event as first encounter in a structured, supported setting to clarify expectations and make practical arrangements

Matching process in focus

- Careful, manual matching of participants as the heart of the project and key to its successful outcome
- Clear 'must-fit' criteria: availability, language, dietary needs
- Additional factors: expectations, location of residence, attendance at (religious) Christmas services, joint participation,
- Balancing efficiency with individual case attention
- Represents the majority of the workload and accounts for most personnel resources

Reach & Impact

- Growing participation over the years (2014: 19 students, 15 hosts; 2025: 111 students, 58 hosts)
- In total (since 2014): 603 students, 386 host participations*
- Students coming from 62 different countries (Top 5: India, Iran, Turkey, China, Pakistan)
- Consistently very positive feedback
- Intercultural exchange and mutual learning
- Individual encounters – sometimes lasting connections

* Total number of host participations includes multiple repeat hosts

Impact

“I was very lonely in Germany, especially when I first arrived, but I was so lucky with my *International Christmas Guest* hosts. I felt like I had now entered not only a country, but a house – it was so warm and welcoming. I made important connections in Germany, not on a professional level, but on a personal level. They are the closest thing to a family I have here.”

Guest

“Our holiday banquet is growing every year, as it has become our tradition to re-invite our student guests of former years. We love to get to know different cultures. Former strangers have long become friends.”

Host

Resources

- Overall low-cost project structure
- Main investment: staff time for coordination and matching
- Additional: public outreach
 - development and distribution of a press release to local print, online, TV and radio media
 - creation of a news story and publication across Studierendenwerk's website and social media platforms
- Scaling limited by organisational capacity (esp. matching process)

Summary & Outlook

- Loneliness and disconnection as recurring challenges for international students
- Project helps to form a connection between international students and city society
- Positive impact for all participants: mutual cultural exchange, lessened sense of disconnection for students, rewarding civic engagement for hosts
- Potential beyond seasonal format (e.g. ongoing encounters/relationships possible)?
- Questions of scaling, digital solutions and sustainability