



British International School Riyadh

The art of making friends at university

Stay upbeat at all times, and empathise without moaning, advises Harriet Swain

Winning friends and influencing people at university is easy since everyone's there to have soulmates and learning experiences anyway.

It's even easier in Freshers' Week, when most [students'](#) critical faculties have been softened up by a mixture of disorientation, alcohol and endless queueing. And at the start of the week, many will renounce any strongly held conviction they ever had in return for a conversational overture and a cup of tea.

The hard part is deciding which people are worth the effort. This is much trickier than in the outside world because you have less to go on. Someone who holds a senior position with your dream employer, has been tipped as a future prime minister and runs a philanthropic trust for deserving graduates is probably worth flashing a smile. The prospects of someone who holds a part-time job in the student bar and ambitions on the ents committee are harder to judge.

So the answer is to smile at everybody. Lots. Also use their name. Lots. Hearing their own name reassures people that the speaker regularly says something worth listening to. It also shows you've remembered it. Make sure you have remembered it, though. And don't risk using a nickname unless you're sure they like it. You may know someone as Spotty Sue, but she may well prefer Susan.

Then, pay compliments. Tell Susan you think that red polka dot vintage dress is a really clever idea. Remark on an especially interesting comment in a seminar. Ask for that Bolognese recipe, book reference, plastic surgeon address.

Next, go out of your way to show interest in whatever other people are interested in, and try to plug into their way of thinking. Ask intelligent questions about why they finally plumped for "freak night" rather than "funk night" as a name for next Wednesday's event. Murmur: "That's such a brave thing to do, Matt, because it shows confidence that the music is strong enough to resist restrictive labelling."

Mostly, though, you should shut-up and let them do the talking. Interject to indicate agreement and engagement, although make sure you do agree and are engaged otherwise you may have to do some difficult back-peddalling later. By becoming a good listener you will arm yourself with information about their interests and experiences that could later prove invaluable. When you meet them again, you will be able to suggest books they might read or events they might want to attend, with you, as well as knowing whether to ask after their migraines or their mother.

Don't be too spookily well-informed of their movements, however, or they may find it disturbing. And while regular texts are a flattering way to show that you're thinking of them, you don't want to show you're thinking of them most of the day.

picnics! Stay upbeat at all times. Empathise, without moaning or ever admitting that your course is rubbish, your boyfriend's a loser and your only hobby is virtual fishing.

Meanwhile, even if your schedule really is packed, remember that keeping friends abreast of your news by posting it on your Facebook site flatters no one but yourself, while adding comments on the sites of other people helps them show the world how popular they are, keeps them grateful and gets your name around.

Now that you've won friends, it's time to start influencing them. Begin by praising their brilliant ideas and telling them about those, few, times in the past when you made one or two mistakes similar to those they may be making. Then, establish several points on which they agree with you wholeheartedly – and conclude that they obviously therefore agree with you on a few further points, especially as they are such thoughtful and socially responsible people. In fact, weren't they the ones who came up with the ideas in the first place?

If you want them to take on board your ideas while recognising that you were the genius who thought them up, talk in dramatic and emphatic terms about your latest insights. Wave your arms about. Exude total confidence in the rightness of your point of view – unless someone comes up with incontrovertible proof that you are talking rubbish. In this case, admit your mistake, and come up with something better, fast.

Sadly, effective as these tips are, they are only really relevant to those in their first or final years. The intervening time at university will be spent mainly in attempting to shake off those embarrassing hangers-on you smiled at too winningly in year one.