

## **Loneliness among international students in the UK**

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## Loneliness among international students in the UK

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**Purpose:** This small scale mixed methods study aims to explore loneliness in an international student population in a single university. Further, to explore the relationship of loneliness in an international student to international student support service use.

**Design:** A convergent parallel mixed method design. An online Jong Gierveld loneliness scale with some additional demographics provided the quantitative data on loneliness in international student population. The qualitative semi-structured interviews explored what the participants themselves said about their experience of loneliness.

**Findings:** The online Jong Gierveld loneliness scale provides some evidence of high levels of loneliness, three out of four, across the international student sample with no single subgroup or population group identified as lonelier. The quantitative data shows a negative relationship between loneliness and the number of international experience team service used ( $Rho(56) = -.52$   $p < 0.01$ ). This data also showed that although knowledge of such services was high 30% of this sample chose not to use them as a result of events being full of too many strangers, or not feeling confident going as well as course work and part time employment pressures. The interviews provide evidence of the loneliness at the beginning on arrival, as might be expected, with participants talking about isolating themselves and talking to friends and family back home. For some this was not just an arrival issue but continued throughout their time in the UK and became more prominent when social situations changed such as people they had got to know moving or leaving. In addition, the qualitative data illustrates international student

support service use as an important means of expanding social networks and having plans but also how for some 'being lost in a crowd' can be a barrier to attending.

**Research implications:** This study provides support for understanding the scale of loneliness in international students in the UK and as such for loneliness and tackling loneliness to be part of healthy university and university wellbeing agendas. The empirical data supports the role of international student support service use in helping students deal with loneliness and identifies some barriers to use of such services.

**Originality/value:** One of small number of studies looking at loneliness in international students in the UK and one of few using a loneliness scale alongside qualitative data.

## **Introduction**

In an increasingly globalised world, a growing number of students aims to pursue a degree outside their home country to increase their chances on the job market, improve their language skills or use the time for personal growth (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen & Pacarella, 2008). With almost half a million international students each year, representing about 20 percent of all university students, the United Kingdom is the second most popular destination for students coming from abroad to study in Higher Education (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2016; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). Simultaneously, international students are invaluable for universities in the UK as they bring diversity and cultural exchange to the campus and present an important income source for the university and local businesses (Universities UK, 2014). However, migrating to a different country for the purpose of education can be a challenging and stressful process (Bhugra & Becker, 2005).

When crossing national borders, international students often leave their family and friends, wider social network and known environment behind and are confronted with a largely new and unknown setting (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). Potential cultural differences as well as adjusting to the new environment can make it difficult for students to build new social networks and receive the social support they need in this crucial phase of adjustment. Consequently, many international students may experience periods of loneliness during their stay (Tsai, Wang & Wei, 2017).

The university setting is recognised as having a unique potential to provide effective services to support student health and wellbeing (Dooris, Cawood, Doherty & Powell, 2010). The aim of the healthy university setting is to create a learning environment and organisational structure that promotes the physical, mental, emotional

and social health and wellbeing among its students and staff (Dooris et al., 2010), the more usual focus is on promoting healthy eating, sufficient physical activity and exercise, as well as raising awareness about sexual health, substance abuse and common mental health issues (Healthy Universities, 2018). Loneliness is rarely recognised explicitly as an issue affecting students in either the wider health university literature or within international student literature and support provision within the UK.

### ***Concept of loneliness***

Since the 1970s, the concept of loneliness has received a lot of academic attention. The most frequently used concept in empirical research nowadays is the cognitive discrepancy theory of loneliness, developed by Perlman and Peplau in 1981 (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2018). Contrary to many other approaches, which see loneliness as a mere absence of important relationships, the cognitive discrepancy model focuses on the role of social expectations and describes loneliness as the result of a discrepancy between the social relationship people want and those they actually have (De Jong Gierveld & Tesch-Roemer, 2012). Thus, Perlman and Peplau (1981, 3) define loneliness as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively".

This definition incorporates three important characteristics. First, loneliness refers to a predominantly unpleasant experience which is expressed in negative feelings, such as sadness, restlessness or unfocused dissatisfaction (Weiss, 1973). Second, the term deficiency relates to the cognitive discrepancy model and underlines that the person has to perceive their existing relationships as less optimal than desired in order to feel lonely. Finally, the definition highlights that it is not only the number of relationships that is important but also their quality, which means that a person can subjectively feel lonely despite having an objectively large social network when they perceive a lack of quality in their relations, and vice versa (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006).

### ***Health and loneliness***

Although the occasional feeling of loneliness is completely human, it can have detrimental effects on people's physical and mental health if it persists over time and creates reoccurring negative thoughts and behaviour (Capiocco & Patrick, 2008; Elliot & Roberts, 2016). As such, it can lead to increased morbidity and mortality rates,

comparable to health risk factors associated with physical inactivity, obesity or substance abuse (Holdt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Various studies have shown that loneliness is associated with a higher risk for cardiovascular diseases and different types of cancer, as well as lower levels of mental well-being, such as depression, impaired cognitive performance and increased suicide rates (Leigh-Hunt, Bagguley, Bash, Turner & Turnbull, 2017; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). The detrimental effect loneliness can have on peoples' wellbeing emphasises how important it is to address loneliness among international students at an early point of their stay and the university setting has a unique potential to provide effective services that can help international students in times of loneliness (Dooris, Cawood, Doherty & Powell, 2010).

### ***Literature review***

Much research has explored the concept of loneliness in general (see de Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2018) and its effects on mental and physical health (e.g. Cacioppo & Patric, 2008; Richardson, Elliot & Roberts, 2016; Holdt-Lunstad et al., 2015). In addition, research has examined the adjustment journey experienced by international students (e.g. Brown & Holloway, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015), of which the occasional feeling of loneliness can be a major part. However, the specific issue of loneliness among international students, especially in the UK, has received little academic attention so far (Patron, 2014).

There is a small amount of research focusing on loneliness among international students (Ennis, 2013; Patron, 2014; Sawir et al., 2008; Weiley, Sommer & Bryce, 2008; Wiseman, 1997). Most of these studies were conducted in Australia or America and used qualitative research methods in the form of in-depth interviews to explore the student's experience of loneliness (Ennis, 2013; Patron, 2014; Sawir et al., 2008; Wiseman, 1997). Some studies also used quantitative data to estimate the prevalence of loneliness: Only one study found international students did not have higher loneliness scores compared to the student population back home (Wiseman, 1997); however, the surveyed students in this study moved to the foreign country as a cohort, living and studying together, which is why they already had a close social network. In contrast, Sawir et al. (2008) and Weiley, Sommer & Bryce (2008) found that up to 65 or even 78 percent of international students, respectively, experienced periods of loneliness since coming to the host country.

None of the studies were conducted in the UK and most used qualitative research methods. In addition, some studies only focused on certain subgroups of international students, such as French students in Australia (Patron, 2014) or American students with Jewish background in Israel (Wiseman, 1997). Others specialised on certain aspects of loneliness experienced by international students, such as differentiating loneliness from homesickness (Ennis, 2013), examining the feeling of alienation after returning back to the home country (Patron, 2014) or assessing the technological support that can be provided by the university to help international students in times of loneliness (Weiley, Sommer & Bryce, 2008).

In order to overcome these gaps in the literature, the present exploratory study aims to examine international students and loneliness in a UK university. It mostly builds on Sawir et al.'s (2008) qualitative work on international students and loneliness in Australia. At the present university, a broad range of services is already offered to international students to help them adjust to university life in the UK. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how and to what extent these international students experience loneliness and whether the services provided by the university can help them in terms of creating new social networks and coping with loneliness during their stay.

### **Methodology:**

The study uses a convergent parallel mixed-method design within a pragmatic methodological approach, with quantitative and qualitative data collected independent from each other. Thus, it advocates a practical and applied research philosophy, guiding the choice of methods, in which the research question is of primary importance (Armitage, 2007; Creswell & Clarke, 2011). This mixed-method design provided differing contributions in terms of data to answer the study questions namely, a) what the levels of loneliness among international students are at the university, b) how they themselves talk about and experience loneliness, and c) if/and how the services provided by the university might link to international student's loneliness.

This design allows for equally prioritising both strands of qualitative and quantitative data and provides an opportunity to explore the same research question from two different methodology contributions and so provide a more comprehensive examination of the research problem (Creswell & Clarke, 2011).

### ***Quantitative data collection***

The quantitative phase of the study consisted of the de Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS) (see de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 1999). The scale has been tested in various studies using different research designs and methods and has generally shown good results in terms of reliability and homogeneity (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2018). In addition to the scale the online research also collected information about socio-demographic characteristics commonly associated with loneliness in previous literature including participants' age, gender, country of origin, arrival date, level of study, relationship status and living arrangements. Finally, participants were asked about their experience of the various activities provided by the university, including their awareness about and their general usage of such services.

A convenience sample completed the scale; international students were recruited through different places in the university commonly used by international students and snowballing was used to contact further possible international students. Such a sampling method is considered valid for small scale studies like the present research; however, it is important to note that it does not achieve a complete representation of the selected population (Neuman, 2011), and thus care should be taken in generalising from the findings.

The final survey sample consisted of 61 sufficient responses. The following table summarises the socio-demographic characteristics of the study population. 36 students were female and 25 were male, and 53 students were between 18 and 34 years old. The students came from a total of 25 different countries: China, India, Nigeria, Vietnam, Japan, Liberia, Zambia, Bahrain, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, France, Greece, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, Bulgaria, Portugal, Poland, Germany, and the United States of America. These countries were sorted into Collectivist and Individualist cultures according to Hofstede's (1998) Cultural Dichotomy Model as these cultures have been associated with different levels of loneliness in previous research (Sawir et al., 2008). In this model, Collectivist cultures are predominantly represented by Asian countries and place a greater emphasis on being integrated in a network, while Individualist cultures, mostly found in Western countries, tend to be more emotionally detached and independent from social groups. Following this model, 45 students came from Collectivist countries in this study and 16 students were from Individualist cultures. In addition, 37 students were enrolled in a taught postgraduate course, 36 were single and 39 lived in shared accommodation.



Table 1 Demographics of sample	N	%
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	33	54.10
25-34	20	32.79
35-39	4	6.56
40-44	3	4.92
45-49	1	1.64
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	36	59.02
Male	25	40.98
<b>Country of Origin</b>		
Individualist Culture	16	26.23
Collectivist Culture	45	73.77
<b>Level of Study</b>		
Undergraduate	7	11.48
Postgraduate Taught	37	60.66
Postgraduate Research	7	11.48
Erasmus	11	18.03
Other	2	3.28
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	36	59.02
Partnership	17	27.87
Married	6	9.84
Divorced	2	3.28
<b>Living Status</b>		
Living Alone	12	19.67
Living in a shared accommodation	39	63.93

### *Qualitative data collection*

Interview participants were selected purposively from the questionnaire (Teddie & Yu, 2007). Participants were selected based on their nationalities, with particular attention to interviewing students from a wide range of different countries and those who had sufficient English skills to participate in in-depth interviews. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled in advance and took place in a private room on campus to offer interviewees a place of trust and privacy. The researcher prepared a range of topics to be covered; however, the order of the questions was not fixed and allowed participants to steer the conversation according to their own experiences (Padgett, 2012). The interview was structured in three main sections: exploring understandings of loneliness, the student's personal experience of loneliness, potential coping strategies including any student's use of university activities.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed through thematic content analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2014) in order to identify patterns, concepts and themes across the dataset and to provide a rich insight into the student's experience of loneliness.

The six interview participants originated from Germany, Bulgaria, India, Japan, China and America. All also completed the quantitative phase of the data as well as taking part in the interviews. Three interviewees were studying a taught Masters course, two were PhD students and one student was in the second year of her undergraduate degree. All interview participants were female and their age ranged from 21 to 39 years. All students had arrived between September 2016 and 2017 with the exception of one student who came to Sheffield in 2013.

### **Ethical considerations**

All appropriate university research ethics proforma were followed in this study, and the key principles of ethical research and guidelines on good research practice outlined in the Framework of Research Ethics (FRE) by the Economic and Social Research Council were implemented (ESRC, 2015). Research participants were given comprehensive information about the research project prior to participation in the form of an information sheet and were made aware that their participation is completely voluntary, including the right not to answer any questions or to withdraw from the study. Thus, informed consent was collected from all participants before being forwarded to the survey or interview. In addition, survey and interview data were collected and stored in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act (1998), and all data was treated confidentially and anonymised in the process of analysis and transcribing. As interviews about emotional topics such as loneliness can potentially cause distress in participants (Breakwell, 2011), the researcher adjusted the interviews according to the student's willingness and emotional capability to share their experience, and a debrief form was created with further referral information to the university's medical and well-being centre in case participants wished to receive further advice on loneliness.

### **Findings**

#### ***Levels of loneliness in the sample of international students***

Overall, the survey showed that 44 out of 61 international students had experienced symptoms of loneliness since coming to the UK, which equals a prevalence rate of

72.13 percent (see table 2). On the DJGLS, lonely students reached a mean loneliness score of 7.30, representing a moderate level of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999). These findings support previous non-UK research showing international students at high risk of experiencing loneliness (65% in Sawir et al., 2008 or even 78% in Weiley, Sommer & Bryce, 2008).

Table 2 Overall measure of loneliness	N	%
<b>Loneliness Status</b>		
Lonely Students	44	72.13
Non-Lonely Students	17	27.87
<b>Loneliness Score, Mean (SD)</b>		
Total population	5.28	3.72
Lonely population	7.30	2.08

A Chi-square test was performed, comparing the socio-demographic characteristics between lonely and non-lonely students (Field, 2013). None of the socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, living status, arrival date etc.) were found to be significantly associated with loneliness. This may provide some evidence that there is little to distinguish between international students who are lonely and those who are not although the small sample size means these findings should be considered with care.

### ***How do international students experience loneliness?***

The qualitative data provides another lens on these findings and some insight into participants personal experience of loneliness. Most interviewees said they felt lonely especially at the beginning of their stay. Many struggled with only having superficial friendships in the UK, missing their close relationships back home, and acknowledged that it takes time to make new friends.

“I mean, I have met really nice people here in NAME OF CITY, but (.) with all of them, I’m in the process of getting to know them. And I just had the feeling that I am missing someone around that I know really well and who knows me very well.”

(Hannah)

Loneliness was not exclusive to the beginnings and arrivals, one participant talked about feeling lonely after two of her close friends moved away after finishing

their degrees. Although she had been in the UK for more than a year, she suddenly felt lonely.

“I feel like, I got one less friend now. Because you feel like, you got so less like connections already and when they go one by one, I feel like, ok, you are getting more and more lonely.” (Saanvi)

Participants reported feeling lonely during traditional holidays in their host country, such as Thanksgiving in the U.S. or Spring Festival in China, missing “*home and local traditions*” (Chen) and a fear of “*missing out on those family ties*” (Grace). Finally, the way participants talked about loneliness varied greatly in intensity and duration, with some students feeling lonely only in certain situations, such as after talking to family back home, whereas other experienced loneliness every day for a few weeks, especially after the first excitement of being in a new country began to fade.

Coping with loneliness had similarities across participants. Most talked of isolating themselves, staying at home and doing something comforting, such as “*watching a movie*” (Saanvi), “*reading a book*” (Hannah) or “*sleeping*” (Anastasia). Along with isolation participants talked of distraction when feeling lonely, such as “*going for a walk*” (Yui), “*doing exercise*” (Saanvi) or “*making sure that there’s an event coming up*” (Grace) in order to meet new people. Thus, building new social networks was important for many students.

### ***Do services provided by the university help international students with loneliness?***

The survey data showed that the vast majority of all respondents (88.33%) knew about the availability of activities and support provided by the university and almost 70% of those who were aware of them had also used them before. In order to evaluate the importance of such services in terms of loneliness, the collected data was used to analyse the correlation between the number of services students used and their level of loneliness. Spearman's Rho was calculated and showed a significant and strong negative correlation between loneliness and number of IET services used ( $\rho(56) = -.52, p < .01$ ), indicating that the more services students used, the less lonely they reported being as measured by the scale.

The qualitative data from the interview confirmed those findings in that many students emphasised how useful those services were in terms of coping with loneliness.

*“I think it helps a lot. Like, I can’t actually really imagine what it would be like if they were not here.” (Anastasia)*

For participants the activities helped them to meet and talk to other international students and they found it was *“easy to connect with them because they are in the same position”* (Hannah). If attended regularly, they also provided the opportunity to keep meeting the same people, which would eventually result in friendships and meetings even outside university activities.

However, the survey data also showed that 30% of those students who knew about the services decided not to use them. The main reasons for this were a lack of time including other commitments, such as course work or a part-time job, a general disinterest in such activities, as well as what one student called *“social anxiety”*, a fear of approaching or talking to strangers. The latter was also confirmed in interviews with participants from India or Japan said that they felt that too many *“strangers”* (Saanvi) attended certain activities, which discouraged them to make contact with other students. In addition, one participant added not feeling confident enough to attend these activities alone and only going if she could find someone to accompany her. It seemed like when participating in activities with many other students to potentially talk to, those students felt *“lost in a crowd”* (Saanvi),

*“I don’t wanna go alone because there are like so many new people in there! I would have stood alone there in the big room, so I was like, hmmm, I don’t want to go there again.” (Saanvi).*

Interestingly this experience was not shared, one student who attended one of the activities at a later point during the term said that the activity was not large enough and she felt like going there did not give her enough opportunities to meet a variety of different people. In line with this, some students also remarked that the connections made at university activities were often superficial and not permanent enough, as the students attending the activities often changed. One interviewee, however, summarized some of this in the way they talked about every student having to find the services that best fit their individual needs.

*“You need to join some activities and then find out which one is suitable for me. And, I understand I am not great at, ehm, finding friends in (.) broad activities. So,*

*when I go to, for example, Conversation Club, there were about 200 students, so I didn't go anymore. But throughout mentoring scheme [...] it's, yeah, so in small groups, I am functioning (laughs)."* (Yui)

### **Discussion & conclusion:**

In summary, the empirical data provides some evidence of high levels of loneliness in this sample, almost 3 in 4 international students (72.13%) had experienced loneliness since coming to the UK, showing a moderate level of loneliness on average (DJGLS mean of 7.30). In addition, no subgroup of international students was identified as significantly lonelier. Overall, international students experienced loneliness of varying degrees and durations at the beginning of their stay, when they were still adjusting to their new environment, or if at a later point, circumstances in their social network changed. Students also reported very similar strategies in terms of coping with loneliness. They would first isolate themselves, staying at home and doing something comforting, followed by talking to close family members and friends back home. Once feeling better, they would try to distract themselves and make plans for meeting people, often purposefully using university activities to expand their social networks.

Both quantitative and qualitative data provides some evidence of the importance of the services provided by the university. The analysis of quantitative data showed a strong negative correlation between the use of services and experiencing loneliness, indicating that the more services students attended, the less lonely they were. The interviews confirmed the importance of those services as well as barriers to attending.

### ***Practical implications for the UK healthy university setting***

The present findings of this study have several implications for international student services and support as well as the wider healthy university approach in the UK higher education sector. One of the main findings is the relatively high prevalence rate of loneliness (72.13%). As loneliness can have detrimental effects on people's health (Richardson, Elliott & Roberts, 2016), it is important to address this issue at an early point, and the university setting has a unique potential to promote students' wellbeing (Dooris et al, 2010). Although the Model and Framework for Action developed by the UK Healthy Universities Network illustrates how common public health issues need to be addressed within the university setting, such as students' state of mental health (Dooris et al., 2010), it does not specifically mention loneliness as a key issue for

international students. In addition, other guidelines for universities, such as the Guide for UK HE Providers on "Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK", do not provide any recommendations in terms of reducing loneliness among international students (QAA, 2015). With an increasing number of international students coming to the UK, the findings of this study thus provide some support for arguing loneliness be considered as an issue for the health and social agenda of universities in the UK. The findings of high levels of loneliness in international students in this study, confirmed by previous non-UK research, also suggest that loneliness needs to be added as an important area of consideration for the health and social agenda of UK universities. In addition, further research should include loneliness measures to develop evidence-based guidelines for UK universities, highlighting which services are most effective in supporting international students.

The strong negative correlation between the number of services accessed and the associated level of loneliness in this study further enhances the importance of such services and confirms the suggestion by Dooris et al. (2010) that activities provided by the university can have a large impact on students' well-being. Weiley, Sommers and Bryce (2008), for example, found that developing a blackboard space online for international students to connect and share their experience decreased their perceived level of social isolation and loneliness. Overall, this study was able to show that the services provided by the university are popular among international students, with more than 90 percent of surveyed students knowing about them and 70 percent having used them before. Similarly, Weiley, Sommers and Bryce (2008) found that 87 percent of international students purposefully attend social events and services at university to reduce feelings of loneliness. Nonetheless, this study showed high levels of loneliness in this sample of international students. This evidence leads us to argue for more consideration of how to tackle barriers to uptake of activities. It may be useful to raise awareness of loneliness among staff running such services and explicitly talk with international students about coping with loneliness.

The finding showing no significant correlation between feeling lonely and different subgroups of international students leads us to argue for services to be open to all international students throughout the year and not predominantly at the beginning of their stay, as other authors have recommended in previous studies (e.g. Ennis, 2013). The findings in this study also suggest that the argument by Sawir et al. (2008), stating that international students from Collectivist cultures are more likely to experience

loneliness in the UK, cannot be confirmed by the present study. However, interviewed students from mainly Collectivist cultures reported not attending university services due a hesitation of going alone, a fear of feeling lost and because they were not used to their availability.

This empirical data in the interviews provides support for finding ways to inform international students about the services available to them, what it like to attend, how big how small they are for students to be able to make informed choices about what might suit them best as well as explaining the benefits of attending, so they can choose which activities are most suitable for their needs. Similar to Sawir et al.'s (2008) study, this data leads us to argue for international students to be better informed about available services, emphasising the need for comprehensive and well-designed information material. Finally, universities should ensure that new international students are informed about loneliness, and points of contacts within and outside the university should be referenced if students wish to receive further help. A wide range of different activities needs to be offered, supporting international students in creating meaningful connections with other students during their stay, and these services should be advertised widely to ensure that international students aware of them.

### ***Further research***

Considering the findings and limitations of this explanatory study, further research is needed to understand the experience of loneliness among international students, their coping strategies as well as the potential of the university setting in the UK in more detail. Thus, it may be beneficial to further explore the experience of non-lonely international students, in order to develop appropriate intervention for those students who are lonely. In addition, a comparative study between more than one university in the UK could be conducted, examining different approaches in terms of supporting international students and evaluating which activities help best to reduce loneliness.

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References: see the journal's instructions for authors for details on style

Table 1. Demographics of sample

Table 2. Overall measure of loneliness