

# ***OPENING UP***



## ***INSIGHTS INTO LONELINESS AMONG STUDENTS***

***A REPORT FOR IQ AND RELATE BY KATE JOPLING AND NICOLE VALTORTA***



**relate**  
the relationship people

## **THE EVIDENCE THAT INFORMS THIS REPORT:**

**This report was commissioned to investigate the experience of loneliness among students in the UK. Its focus was on understanding the nature of the experience of loneliness, its causes and consequences and what action could be taken to address loneliness among students.**

**The report has been informed by a range of research, including:**

- **A systematic review of literature on loneliness and students.**
- **Quantitative analysis of two datasets to draw out fresh insight into students' social relationships in the UK: the Community Life Survey 2016-2017, and Next Steps 2009.**
- **Surveys of current students and parents of young people who were students**

**or who planned to start university in September carried out in July and August 2018 by Censuswide via online survey, responded to by 2004 students and 1027 parents. References to 'our survey' refer to this work. The base figure for all student responses is 2004 unless otherwise stated.**

- **Focus groups in London and Manchester which took place in November 2018 – bringing together 13 and 12 students respectively.**

**A FULL STATEMENT OF METHODS, AND QUALIFICATIONS TO OUR FINDINGS ARE INCLUDED AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT**

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## FOREWORD

BY AIDAN JONES, CEO RELATE & MATT MERRICK, COO IQ

### WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

Going to university can be both an exciting and a daunting time for students. Living away from home for the first time, managing time, money and workloads and making friends from scratch in a new setting requires courage, skills and effort. How students approach these challenges has a huge impact on their university experience, the opportunities they take and the choices they make. Most thrive, but for some making friends is not easy, university life can be a struggle and their wellbeing suffers.

Relationships play a big role in university life and friendships with peers are a critical part of a student's support network. A mismatch between the quantity and quality of relationships that students have, and those they want, can quickly lead to a sense of loneliness and isolation. Often assumed to be a problem for older generations, our research shows that a fifth of UK university students often experience feelings of chronic loneliness. In this report we wanted to address that statistic and start to understand why some students are affected more than others and what support, skills and interventions could help.

### WHY RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Relationships are the beating heart of our lives. It's a truism that looking back over their life, few people would say they wished they had spent more time

at work. Instead, it's the strength and enrichment provided by our family, friends and communities that we recall most fondly.

There is strong evidence for the importance of healthy relationships to our overall wellbeing. This is true for both our most intimate and close relationships with partners and family, and it is true of our social relationships and connections.

**'PEOPLE WHO HAVE CLOSE FRIENDS AND CONFIDANTS, FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURS AND SUPPORTIVE CO-WORKERS ARE LESS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE SADNESS, LONELINESS, LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND PROBLEMS WITH EATING AND SLEEPING [...] SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING IS BEST PREDICTED BY THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF ONE'S SOCIAL CONNECTIONS.'**<sup>1</sup>

Conversely the impact of unhealthy or distressed relationships can have negative consequences for both our mental and physical health, with one study finding that people who live in distressed relationships are three times as likely to suffer from mood disorders such as depression as people who do not experience such relationship distress, and another showing that people with poor social relationships have an increased risk of developing heart disease and stroke.<sup>2,3</sup>

While the importance of social connections and strong relationships is well established, we wanted to know more about students' experience of these issues.

### WHO HAS THIS REPORT BEEN COMMISSIONED BY?

iQ and Relate have come together to form a unique partnership and commissioned this research into how relationships and loneliness can impact student wellbeing.

iQ is one of the UK's largest providers of student accommodation, and is committed to finding out what does – and doesn't – support student wellbeing, with a focus on interventions that can help combat loneliness and build stronger relationships and resilience. As a provider of homes for 28,000 students drawn from all over the world, iQ aims to create an environment that gives students the foundations from which to build a happy, safe and resilient life. Wellbeing is at the heart of this and at the heart of iQ's purpose: to give students their best year yet.

That's why a partnership with the leading relationships charity, Relate, is a natural fit. Relate draws on its 80-year track-record of supporting people's relationships at all stages of life, including thousands of children and young people every year. By developing a deeper understanding of how wellbeing, relationships and loneliness are interconnected, as well as the relational skills that can be learned and developed, we hope to enable students to thrive at university and beyond.

### WHY HAS IT BEEN COMMISSIONED?

There is surprisingly little research into university students' experience of loneliness and many existing assumptions about who it affects are wrong. For example, whilst the first year of student life is often perceived to be the loneliest time for students, in our survey it was second year students who reported feeling lonely the most. We wanted to dig a bit deeper and hope that what we have learnt here about the risk factors for, and consequences of, student loneliness can serve as a catalyst for positive change.

But this research is just the start. More work needs to be done. For our part, we want to draw on the key insights we have uncovered here to work with students to co-create pilot programmes that help facilitate meaningful relationships and combat loneliness. We will test these in three of our sites during the 2019/20 academic year, and scale those that really work across all our sites in 2020/21. We will measure the success of the different activities and interventions trialled in the pilot programme and make these findings publicly available so that others can learn and adopt these approaches.

It is our hope that this research, as well as the pilot programme's findings, will kickstart a national conversation about student wellbeing and encourage others to play a part in helping students to have their best possible experience at university. By working together, we can all play a role in enabling students to have their best years yet.

## WHAT WE HAVE FOUND

### A FIFTH OF STUDENTS ARE LONELY

Loneliness is the negative emotion we feel when there is a mismatch between the relationships we have and those we want. While for the majority of students, university is not a time of loneliness, some people face challenges forming and maintaining social connections, and find their relationships don't match their expectations.

In the survey of more than 2,000 students commissioned for this report, we found that 21% of students reported feeling often or always lonely. We call this being "chronically lonely". This finding is supported by the limited studies that already exist on this subject, which suggest that up to 30% of students are chronically lonely.

### EXPERIENCING CHRONIC LONELINESS HAS REAL CONSEQUENCES

For most students, loneliness is something experienced only from time to time. Feeling lonely occasionally is a normal part of life. Our findings show that nearly 80% of students are not chronically lonely (44% said they were sometimes lonely, 23% occasionally, 9% hardly ever and 2% never).

However, experiencing chronic loneliness is linked to negative outcomes including poor mental and physical health, and higher risk of dropping out.

### MAKING FRIENDS IS A CHALLENGE

74% of students said that making friends and building meaningful relationships is one of the biggest challenges facing students when starting out at university.

And in our focus groups many students highlighted the first few months of university as particularly difficult, with the pressure to establish new relationships keenly felt.

However, we found a broadly positive picture of the extent of friendships among students, with over 90% of students having at least one close friend at university, and 56% of students having between two to three close friends at university.

### SOME GROUPS FACE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES

Levels of loneliness were highest among second year students (25%). And through our wider research we identified that some other factors might put people at increased risk of loneliness, including gender, social class and being an international student.

### RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IS GENERALLY GOOD

It's not just the number of friendships we have that makes a difference to whether or not we feel lonely, the quality of these relationships is also critical. Our survey revealed a broadly positive picture with 56% saying they had good relationships with other students and just 12% saying they had bad relationships.

### LONELINESS IS NOT JUST ABOUT ISOLATION OR LACK OF SOCIAL CONTACT

For those students who do face loneliness, the causes are more complex than a simple lack of social contact.

We asked students about what they thought causes loneliness among students, and the top three most commonly chosen reasons were the stress of work (45%), social anxiety (41%) and feeling cut off from family and friends (33%). In our focus groups students told us that social media could contribute to unrealistic expectations of social lives, and created a sense of pressure around relationships.

### LIVING ARRANGEMENTS CAN POSITIVELY AFFECT RELATIONSHIPS

When asked about where students expected to meet the people with whom they would form lasting friendships, students most commonly selected people they live with (63%) followed by people they met on their course (58%) and clubs and societies (35%).

Where students live seems to make a difference to their relationships. A majority (65%) of students agreed that living in their accommodation helped them to make friends. And levels of loneliness were lower among those living in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) – with 20% of students living in PBSA reporting that they were often or always lonely, compared to 22% of those living in all other forms of accommodation.

### STUDENTS NEED REGULAR, AND FREQUENT CONTACT WITH OTHER PEOPLE TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Through our discussions in focus groups it became clear that the design of accommodation, the social activities that are offered and the way courses are

structured are all important in enabling students to meet one another time and again, to allow friendship to grow in a way that feels safe and natural.

### FEWER THAN HALF OF STUDENTS KNOW WHERE TO SEEK HELP FOR LONELINESS

Students who experience chronic loneliness normally need help from services. However only 41% of students said they would know where to turn for help if they were feeling lonely, and over a third (35%) said they would not. Friends and family outside university were the most commonly cited sources of support (63%) to whom students would turn if they felt lonely, followed by other students (41%) and university welfare services (27%). However, in our focus groups it became clear that in practice speaking to friends and family could be difficult.

### OVER A THIRD OF STUDENTS SAY UNIVERSITIES SHOULD PROVIDE MORE SUPPORT FOR LONELINESS

When asked about the key challenges around which students thought universities could provide more support, loneliness was the fourth most commonly selected issue with over a third (36%) identifying this among the top three priorities. The three most commonly selected issues were mental health (64%), debt (54%) and stress (40%). In our focus groups we found that students wanted support with the issues they felt underlie loneliness, such as mental health, confidence and relationships skills. Our review of the evidence suggests that peer support might be one solution.

## OUR NEXT STEPS

Loneliness is a complex issue and there will not be one single solution for all students, or any other group. Feeling lonely from time to time is a normal part of life, but we want to do what we can to help students build supportive networks so that their experience of loneliness does not become chronic or detrimental to their university experience. With the support of Relate, iQ will draw on this research and their collective expertise to inform a programme of information, activities and interventions to support our students' wellbeing throughout their university journey. Just as we have involved some of our current students in the research itself, so we will ensure that a representative group of students is in the driving seat when it comes to prioritising the issues they want to tackle and the way that our wellbeing programme is designed and delivered.

Through co-creating this programme with students across several platforms, we will ensure that it is grounded in their own understanding of the challenges they and other students face in building positive social connections at university.

By continuing to build on the experience we offer, we hope to give the thousands of students living in iQ's accommodation their best year yet while living with us, providing a supportive environment from which to make the most of the opportunities open to them. Of course, there are many other students across the UK and we hope that this report will add to the evidence base about students' experience of loneliness and be of value to others across the higher education sector and beyond.

It is our ambition that the report alongside the pilot programme's findings, will not only add to the national conversation about student wellbeing but will also encourage all involved to step forward, embrace the unexpected, try doing things differently and play a key part in helping students to have their best possible experience at university.



AIDAN JONES, CEO RELATE MATT MERRICK, COO iQ

Over recent decades there has been growing interest in student wellbeing and mental health: from the establishment, in 2003, of the Universities UK / Guild HE Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education Working Group, through to last year's announcement of a new Universities' Mental Health Charter – the past decade and a half has seen growing concern around the apparently declining levels of wellbeing among students in UK universities.<sup>4</sup>

This growing awareness of the critical importance of student wellbeing and mental health has increasingly gained public attention and therefore traction in the UK media, gaining significant momentum over the past few years. Analysis by Brunswick Insights shows the number of articles on wellbeing and loneliness published in Tier 1 UK media outlets over the last three years has increased by 33%, (roughly 900 articles published in 2016 to 1200 articles published in 2018). Of these articles, the number which focus on students has increased from 14.5% in 2016 to 17.3% in 2018. More broadly over the last year and a half, the media narrative around wellbeing and loneliness has shifted in focus from loneliness and older people and wellbeing in the workplace to a much greater emphasis on the mental health and wellbeing of younger people.

Good quality relationships are critically important for our wellbeing and have clear consequences for an array of outcomes, from educational attainment to mental health, quality of life and even crime rates. Our

capacity for forming and maintaining relationships – our 'relational capability' – directly impacts on our ability to achieve things we value – being healthy, having a good job, being safe, being happy, having self-respect. And our relationships are fundamental, in their own right, to our sense of self and to giving our lives meaning. Relationships are both means to wellbeing and constitutive of wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>

Loneliness, by contrast, is what happens when our relationships are not of sufficient quality or quantity to meet our needs – it is fundamentally damaging to our wellbeing, and to a wide range of outcomes beyond.

Loneliness is a growing priority for Government, in research, and, as our recent survey of students has shown, for students themselves.

**WHEN WE ASKED ABOUT THE KEY CHALLENGES AROUND WHICH UNIVERSITIES SHOULD PROVIDE MORE SUPPORT - STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH (64%), DEBT (54%), AND STRESS (40%) WERE MOST COMMONLY SELECTED AMONG THE TOP THREE. LONELINESS WAS THE FOURTH MOST COMMONLY SELECTED FACTOR - WITH 36% OF STUDENTS IDENTIFYING THIS AMONG THE TOP THREE PRIORITIES<sup>6</sup>**

In this report we explore students' experience of loneliness, its causes and consequences, and what students think about how they might be better supported to avoid or address loneliness in the future.

### **LONELINESS IN THE UK**

In January 2018, the UK Government became in the first in the world to appoint a Minister for Loneliness, with a promise to develop a national strategy for loneliness<sup>6</sup>, as part of the Government's response to the work of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness.<sup>7</sup>

In October 2018, the national strategy was launched<sup>8</sup>, followed closely by the publication of a strategy by the Scottish Government in December 2018.<sup>9</sup> Consultation on a Welsh Strategy remains underway at the time of writing.<sup>10</sup>

These strategies reflect a growing understanding that loneliness affects people of all ages and at all stages of life, but that older and younger adults seem particularly vulnerable to becoming lonely.<sup>11</sup>

**YOUNG OR OLD,  
LONELINESS DOESN'T  
DISCRIMINATE**

JO COX MP

The universal nature of loneliness was also explored in work for the British Red Cross and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, which additionally highlighted the impact of life transitions on loneliness.<sup>12,13</sup>

Jo Cox's own personal experience of loneliness sprang from her time at university, and the transition to university has been recognised as a potential trigger to loneliness within the new strategies published by Government, with the England strategy highlighting plans for the Department for Education to improve mental health support for students and to set up a working group to review the support needed for students in the transition into university (a measure which was first announced in June 2018 as part of the University Mental Health Charter<sup>14</sup>).

In this report we hope to enrich the debate about loneliness among students, and to contribute to further thinking about how it might best be addressed.



# 2

## **A MISMATCH IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS**

While most of us instinctively recognise the feeling of loneliness, and have some personal experience of it, it is important to be clear about what we mean by loneliness when we are considering how best to support people to either avoid or overcome it.

**LONELINESS IS A SUBJECTIVE**

**UNWELCOME FEELING OF LACK**

**OR LOSS OF COMPANIONSHIP.**

**IT HAPPENS WHEN WE HAVE**

**A MISMATCH BETWEEN THE**

**QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF SOCIAL**

**RELATIONSHIPS THAT WE HAVE,**

**AND THOSE THAT WE WANT.<sup>15</sup>**

One of the key things about loneliness is that it is subjective, and it is therefore different from social isolation which is a (more) objective state measured by the absence of relationships, ties or contacts with others.<sup>16</sup>

Loneliness is a complex and personal experience. It is impossible to measure whether someone is lonely without speaking to them about their feelings. And there is no objectively measured "dose" of company or relationships that will protect everyone from loneliness. While some of us need to be sustained by a wide web of closer and looser ties with other people, others of us need just one deep relationship to sustain us.

While increasing people's level of social connection may play a part in reducing loneliness, it will not be a complete solution for everyone, because the

quality of their relationships, their responses to the interactions they have, and their expectations of their social connections are equally important.

In our focus groups students spoke about their personal experiences of feeling lonely and identified clearly that these were rooted as much in how they experienced and perceived their relationships, as in how much contact with others they had.

***I THINK BEING LONELY IS MORE THAN BEING ALONE, BECAUSE IF YOU IMAGINE, YOU'VE LIVED AT HOME YOUR WHOLE LIFE, YOU HAVE ALL THESE MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS THAT BUILT OVER YEARS, LIKE YOUR BEST FRIENDS AND YOUR FAMILY. ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU'RE BY YOURSELF, YOU HAVEN'T GOT... YOU MIGHT BE SURROUNDED BY FRIENDS, BUT THEY'RE NOT MEANINGFUL, THEY DON'T KNOW YOU THROUGH THE YEARS, LIKE YOUR MOM WOULD.***

**FEMALE, 20, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

While loneliness can be an unpleasant experience, for most people it is not a serious cause for concern. Loneliness is a normal part of the human experience and it plays an important role in motivating us to seek out connection. In this way it has been compared to hunger and thirst, in that it alerts us to something missing in our lives and motivates us to seek it out.<sup>17</sup>

However, when loneliness becomes chronic – which is normally defined as when we feel lonely often, or all, of the time – it can start to have serious impacts.



# 3

## LONELINESS MATTERS

While there has been relatively little research exploring the impact of loneliness on students specifically, loneliness among students is of interest to both policy makers and those working with students, because of the growing body of research that demonstrates its damaging effects. Research has consistently demonstrated the direct effects of loneliness and social isolation on health and its indirect effects in terms of contributing to harmful health behaviours.

**AMONG STUDENTS WE  
FOUND THAT LONELINESS IS  
PARTICULARLY ASSOCIATED  
WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH  
AND HAS BEEN LINKED TO  
DROPPING OUT.**

The weight of evidence on the health impacts of loneliness is compelling. We know that people who feel lonely are more likely to rate their health as poor<sup>18</sup> that low levels of social engagement significantly increase mortality,<sup>20</sup> and that longitudinal research indicates that loneliness also predicts increased morbidity and mortality.<sup>21</sup> Weak social connections have been found to have a greater impact on mortality than other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, loneliness is also linked with unhealthy behaviours such as drinking, smoking, taking less exercise and eating fewer fruits and vegetables.

<sup>23 24 25 26 27 28</sup>

In relation to students, specifically, research highlights the strong correlation between mental health issues and loneliness, with mental health issues acting as both a consequence of and a trigger to loneliness and social isolation among students.

The proportion of people who report having felt depressed because of feeling alone is significantly higher among those aged 18-34 (53%) compared to those aged over 55 (32%).<sup>29</sup> In addition, studies have shown that among undergraduates, feelings of loneliness predict greater anxiety, stress, depression and worse general mental health over time, and are associated with an increased likelihood of developing eating disorders.<sup>30</sup> And conversely young people who have access to a supportive inner social circle are less likely to experience mental ill health or distress and make less use of university support services.<sup>31</sup>

There are also clear links between loneliness and dropping out. For example students who report that they have considered dropping out of university are far more likely to report being lonely than those who have never considered dropping out (43% as compared to 22%).<sup>32</sup> Loneliness is also linked to negative experiences of university – with a quarter of undergraduates who rate their university experience as being worse than expected stating that this is because of limited interaction with other students.<sup>33</sup> This is significant because, in analysis of the Next Steps

survey from 2009, undertaken as part of this study, we found that for 1 in 10 students, the experience of university turns out to be worse than they had anticipated.

As well as negative outcomes for individuals there is evidence that loneliness impacts on service use, with the most lonely young people seeking comparatively more help for mental health problems from GPs, psychiatrists, counsellors or psychotherapists<sup>34</sup> and students who report that they have lower levels of social support being more likely to use university support services.<sup>35</sup>

Loneliness among young people is also associated with a range of other issues where the direction of causation is not always clear. For example, lonely young people report lower optimism about their ability to succeed in life and use more negative strategies to cope with stress, such as withdrawing and obsessing about problems rather than seeking help or taking pragmatic steps to rectify the situation.<sup>36</sup> They also report lower overall life satisfaction.<sup>37 38</sup>



In addition, there are links to damaging health behaviours, with lonely young people engaging in less day-to-day physical activity, more likely to be daily smokers, at greater risk of obesity and having worse sleep quality.<sup>39 40</sup>

Finally, some evidence also suggests loneliness is associated with excessive use of Twitter<sup>41</sup> and more problematic technology use in general.<sup>42</sup> These issues were reflected in our discussions in focus groups.

### APPROACHES TO LONELINESS

The very clear links between loneliness and mental health issues among students, suggest that the approaches currently being taken to loneliness among students - in which loneliness is tackled as part of broader approaches to student mental wellbeing - are well targeted. However, there are some risks. If loneliness is understood only in so far as it links to mental health issues, the potential to address it through wider social and societal interventions may be missed.

# 4

## ONE IN FIVE STUDENTS FACE LONELINESS

While chronic loneliness is a serious cause for concern, it is important to recognise that, across all age groups, the majority of people do not experience loneliness on an ongoing basis. Most people report that they feel loneliness never or hardly ever, or only sometimes.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, most people have good quality social relationships<sup>44</sup> and this was reflected in our survey of students.

**MOST STUDENTS (56%) WERE POSITIVE ABOUT THE QUALITY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS (40% RATED THEM GOOD, AND 16% VERY GOOD). ONLY 12% RATED THEIR RELATIONSHIPS AS BAD.**

However, emerging evidence suggests that, among students, levels of loneliness are significant – with a recent report for the Office for National Statistics on loneliness among young people highlighting the transition to university, as a potential explanatory factor for the higher levels of loneliness seen among young people aged 18-24 overall.<sup>45</sup>

In particular, there is evidence to suggest that levels of loneliness among students are higher than those of other people of similar ages, and higher than those of groups more often recognised as being at risk – such as older people.

While studies of loneliness among students are few, what studies there are suggest that around 46% of students experience loneliness at least some of the time and up to 30% experience chronic loneliness.<sup>46 47 48 49</sup> These levels

of loneliness were reflected in work done for this project, including:

- Fresh analysis of the Community Life Survey 2016-17
- An online survey of students carried out during July and August 2018 by Censuswide

Both of which suggested that levels of loneliness were significant.

21% of students responding to our survey said that in the past year at university they had been lonely often or always.

In our analysis of the Community Life Survey 2016-17 - one of the few major national surveys to include questions on loneliness and isolation among younger adults - we found that levels of loneliness among students were higher than those of other young people in the survey. While sample sizes were small, our analysis showed that:

- The rate of loneliness among students is nearly double that of non-students: 9.5% of full-time students report feeling lonely often or always, compared with 7.6% of part-time students and 5.5% of non-students.
- Full-time students are half as likely to report that they never feel lonely compared with non-students (10.4% as compared with 21.3%).

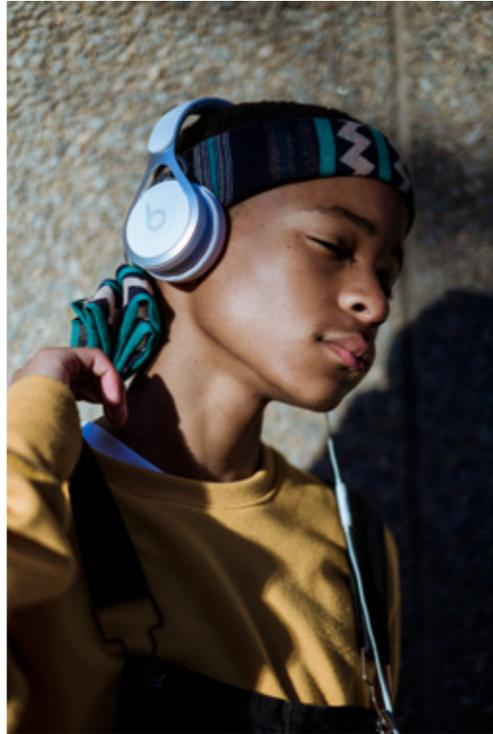
However, this analysis also demonstrated that students are less isolated than their non-student counterparts:

- Students are less likely to be isolated (i.e. to live alone and be in touch with family or friends two

to three times a week or less) than non-students – with only 1% of full-time students isolated, compared with 7% of non-students.

- Full-time students are more likely to live with others and have more contact with family and friends via the internet or text and instant messages, and non-students are twice more likely to spend days without seeing family or friends outside their household than students (with 26.7% of students seeing someone outside the household daily, but only 12.2% of non-students).

In this way our analysis reinforces the distinction between loneliness and social isolation among students, and demonstrates why, for many students, simply increasing social contact may not provide a solution to issues of loneliness. Instead we need to consider the quality of students' relationships, and their expectations and attitudes towards them too. As a student in one of our focus groups said:



**ALTHOUGH THE QUANTITY HAS GONE UP, BUT MAYBE THE QUALITY OF FRIENDSHIPS ISN'T AS GOOD.**

FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

# 5

## RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE TOUGH

Whether or not we are lonely depends on the quality of our relationships and our attitudes to, expectations and experiences of them. Building relationships can be hard work and students recognise that this is sometimes a real challenge for them.

74% OF STUDENTS WE SURVEYED AGREED THAT BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WAS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY.

While social isolation caused by physical barriers to getting out and about can be a major trigger for loneliness among some groups – such as carers, disabled people and some older people – in our focus groups physical barriers to social connection were referenced far less than emotional and psychological barriers to positive relationships.

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE FACTORS WHICH IMPACT STUDENT LONELINESS, STRESS OF WORK (SELECTED BY 45% OF STUDENTS), SOCIAL ANXIETY (SELECTED BY 41% OF STUDENTS) AND FEELING CUT OFF FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS (SELECTED BY 33% OF STUDENTS) WERE MOST COMMONLY SELECTED AS AMONG THE TOP THREE FACTORS.

### SEPARATION AND TRANSITION

A key challenge facing students is the need to forge new relationships as they transition to university and are (often) separated both emotionally and physically from family and friends.

WHEN WE ASKED WHEN THEY BELIEVED STUDENTS WERE MOST LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE LONELINESS, THE MOST FREQUENTLY IDENTIFIED PERIOD WAS DURING THE FIRST THREE MONTHS OF UNIVERSITY (SELECTED BY 29% OF STUDENTS).

This emphasis on the transition to university as a difficult time was reflected in our focus groups.

**WHEN I CAME FROM HOME, THE FIRST YEAR IT WAS QUITE A LONELY TIME THE FIRST FEW MONTHS. I DID GET TO KNOW A LOT OF PEOPLE FROM MY HALLS AND FROM THE COLLEGE I WAS IN, BUT I STILL FELT LONELY, BECAUSE IT'S LIKE EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT AND YOU LIVE IN A DIFFERENT PLACE.**

FEMALE, 20, INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

### **LACK OF SOCIAL SKILLS**

Another concern that students reflected was a sense that for some people a lack of basic skills in building relationships could create a barrier to making friends. Students were aware that some people found social interaction more challenging, and they felt that these individuals could be at particular risk of loneliness.

Students' opinions were divided as to whether young people leaving school were well equipped for building relationships at university - with more agreeing they were well equipped than disagreed; 35% agreed they were well equipped, 32% neither agreed nor disagreed and 33% disagreed.

However, analysis of the experience of students surveyed by Next Steps in 2009, found that one in ten students found it harder to socialise at university than they had expected.

***I DON'T THINK WE'RE VERY GOOD AT BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS WITH PEOPLE AND I THINK THAT GOES BACK TO THE THING, LIKE, LACK OF SOCIAL SKILLS.***

**FEMALE, 25, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, LONDON**

***IF YOU'RE MORE OF AN INTROVERT IN THE SENSE THAT YOU WOULDN'T GO OUT AND GO TO CLUBS YOURSELF THAT THE UNI DOESN'T, OR OTHER PLACES DON'T PUT THAT ON, THEN PEOPLE CAN BECOME I GUESS LONELY IN THEMSELVES THROUGH THAT.***

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

Additionally, students recognised that people from certain backgrounds might find socialising particularly challenging.

***I THINK IT DEPENDS ON THE LIFESTYLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT REALLY, BECAUSE IF YOU'RE RAISED IN MAYBE A CONSERVATIVE PLACE, [...] IT'S CONSERVATIVE PEOPLE THAT DON'T LET, ESPECIALLY GIRLS, GO OUT A LOT. [...] SO, THEY WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH PEOPLE, LIKE OTHER PEOPLE WOULD.***

**FEMALE, 20, INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

### **LINKS WITH MENTAL HEALTH**

Linked to the sense that personal characteristics and attitudes were crucial to people's experiences of relationships, students reflected a clear understanding of the links between loneliness and poor mental health – in particular, anxiety and depression.

The evidence clearly demonstrates that people with mental health issues are at greater risk of loneliness. Young adults with a history of mental health disorders are more likely to report feeling lonely. And in one study 58% of students with a mental health condition reported that they often or always felt lonely or isolated, compared with 26% of those who did not suffer from a mental health condition.<sup>50</sup>

In our focus groups students reflected this awareness and said that they thought psychological support could play an important role in addressing loneliness.

***I THINK, REALISTICALLY, IF YOU'RE LONELY, YOU HAVE MORE DEEP-ROOTED ISSUES, MAYBE INSECURITY OR STUFF THAT'S HAPPENED. [...] LIKE, YOU'RE NOT JUST GOING TO FEEL LONELY, THERE'S GOING TO BE SOMETHING BENEATH THAT.***

**FEMALE, 20, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

### **PRESSURE OF WORK**

The pressure of academic study was also recognised as creating both practical barriers to relationships, in reducing time for socialising, and stress and anxiety which made it harder to focus on friends and could make people withdrawn.

***I THINK SOME PEOPLE MIGHT FEEL MORE LONELY WHEN THINGS SETTLE DOWN A BIT, WHEN THERE'S LESS SOCIAL EVENTS GOING ON. AND DURING TIMES WHERE THERE'S LOADS OF DEADLINES AND YOU'RE DOING A LOT OF COURSEWORK, ESSAYS OR REVISING, YOU MIGHT FEEL MORE LONELY DURING THAT TIME.***

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

## UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

Beyond the issues identified in our survey, in our focus groups students highlighted other aspects of student life that they felt put people at risk of loneliness. They highlighted a sense of pressure to have a good social life, and how being surrounded by other people apparently having fun with friends could compound feelings of loneliness, particularly among those who struggled socially.

Students in our survey recognised that having unrealistic or elevated expectations of their social lives or social relationships while at university could lead to loneliness.

STUDENTS' OPINIONS WERE DIVIDED AS TO WHETHER STUDENTS STARTING UNIVERSITY HAD REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR SOCIAL LIVES AT UNIVERSITY WITH SLIGHTLY MORE AGREEING THAT THEY WERE REALISTIC THAN DISAGREED - 37% AGREED THEIR EXPECTATIONS WERE REALISTIC, 26% NEITHER AGREED NOR DISAGREED AND 36% DISAGREED.

**THERE'S KIND OF AN EXPECTATION THAT STUDENTS ARE ALWAYS MEANT TO BE HAVING A GOOD TIME. SO THEN IF YOU'RE NOT HAVING A GOOD TIME, YOU KIND OF THINK LIKE THAT'S REALLY WEIRD THAT YOU'RE NOT.**

MALE, 19, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

While social media is often cited as a potential contributor to unrealistic expectations of relationships among young people,<sup>51</sup> students' views on the impact of social media were mixed.

29% OF STUDENTS WE SURVEYED REPORTED THAT THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE RELATIONSHIPS OF STUDENTS IN GENERAL WAS MOSTLY POSITIVE, 50% BELIEVED IT WAS NEITHER POSITIVE NOR NEGATIVE AND 21% REPORTED IT TO BE NEGATIVE. HOWEVER, SIGNIFICANTLY MORE STUDENTS THOUGHT THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THEIR OWN RELATIONSHIPS WAS POSITIVE (36%) THAN THOUGHT IT WAS NEGATIVE (17%) - THOUGH MORE STILL WERE NEUTRAL (47%).

For parents of students, 23% said that they thought the impact of social media on students' relationship was mostly positive, 52% said it was neither negative nor positive and 25% said its impact was mostly negative.

In our focus groups students recognised that social media could contribute to loneliness by building unrealistic expectations of relationships, and by creating a barrier to more meaningful face-to-face interaction.

**I THINK SOCIAL MEDIA MIGHT PLAY A ROLE, BECAUSE I THINK MANY OF US HAVE PEOPLE ON SOCIAL MEDIA WHO WE WERE AT SCHOOL WITH AND YOU'RE SEEING PARTS OF THEIR LIVES AT OTHER UNIVERSITIES AND STUFF LIKE THAT. AND YOU MIGHT COMPARE YOURSELF TO WHAT THEIR EXPERIENCES ARE, EVEN THOUGH YOU'RE ONLY SEEING PART OF IT ON SOCIAL MEDIA.**

FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

**PEOPLE SPEND A LONG TIME LOOKING AT THEIR PHONES AND OBVIOUSLY WITH THEIR PHONE YOU'VE GOT ACCESS TO ALL THIS SOCIAL MEDIA AND STUFF. SO, IT MEANS THAT PEOPLE HAVING IT RIGHT IN THEIR HANDS COULD CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS LONELINESS AND STUFF, BECAUSE THAT'S ALL THEY'RE PREOCCUPIED BY.**

MALE, 19, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

However, they also recognised that social media could sometimes help people to maintain existing relationships, and could offer an easy and low risk way of connecting with people and a means of delivering support and advice around issues like loneliness.

**SITTING ON YOUR PHONE, YOU KNOW, THERE'S NOT TOO MUCH RISK, IF THAT PERSON DOESN'T WANT TO MEET YOU.**

MALE, 24, INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON

Understanding which students are most at risk of loneliness and when people might start to experience chronic loneliness is important as it makes it easier to target support. Because there has been relatively little research in this area, it is hard to make definitive statements about who is most at risk, however our conversations with students, and our analysis of the evidence, have started to uncover some potential areas of focus.

### THE LONELIEST TIME

At present, understandably, there is significant emphasis on supporting students to build relationships during their transition to university and students in our focus groups agreed that this was a difficult period in terms of relationships.

Some qualitative studies have suggested that the first year of university can be a particularly lonely time for both UK and international students<sup>52 53 54</sup> and in our survey 29% of students said that they thought the first three months of university would be the loneliest time.

**HOWEVER, WE FOUND THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF LONELINESS WERE AMONG SECOND YEAR STUDENTS WITH 25% OF SECOND YEAR STUDENTS SAYING THEY WERE OFTEN OR ALWAYS LONELY.<sup>b</sup>**

This may reflect the fact that, while students experience intense loneliness during the transition, chronic loneliness

sets in over a longer time. In our focus groups, students also said that during the second year the academic work pressure tends to increase, and organised social activities are fewer.

**I WASN'T LONELY AT ALL IN MY FIRST THREE MONTHS, I WAS ENJOYING MY LIFE, AND SECOND YEAR WAS AWFUL.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, LONDON**

As a result it may be helpful to consider how support with relationships can be extended right across students' time at university rather than focussed only on the early transition.

Beyond this, our work has also highlighted some groups who may benefit from extra support.

### FEMALE STUDENTS

We uncovered higher levels of loneliness among female students than male students.

**23% OF FEMALE STUDENTS SAID THEY WERE OFTEN OR ALWAYS LONELY, COMPARED TO 17% OF MALE STUDENTS.**

And this was reflected in our analysis of the Community Life Survey, where we found that female students were more likely to report frequent feelings of loneliness.

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Another group which may be more vulnerable to loneliness, are international students.

In the literature there is some evidence to suggest that international students may have smaller networks than their British counterparts<sup>55 56</sup> and these findings were reflected in our focus groups, with students highlighting both the physical distance from home, and a sense of emotional distance due to cultural and language barriers.

**WHEN I FIRST CAME HERE IT WAS A HUGE TRANSITION [...] I HAD TO TAKE CARE OF MY HOME AS WELL AS MY WORK, STUDIES, SO I HAD TO BALANCE EVERYTHING, AND I DON'T KNOW ANYONE AROUND.**

**FEMALE, 22, INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

**A LOT OF BRITISH STUDENTS, THEY'RE USED TO GOING OUT DRINKING. BUT A LOT OF OTHER CULTURES IN OTHER COUNTRIES WOULDN'T DO THAT.**

**MALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

### CLASS AND BACKGROUND

Students also said that being from a different class or home background to the majority of students could be a barrier, making it harder to relate to others around you.

**AS SOMEONE FROM A QUITE WORKING-CLASS BACKGROUND AND AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER I FOUND THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE WERE MORE MIDDLE CLASS AND THERE IS A KIND OF, I DON'T KNOW... IT'S A BIT HARD IT IS JUST RELATING, I'VE FOUND.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

**IT MIGHT DEPEND ON WHAT TYPE OF AREA YOU COME FROM, BECAUSE [...] MY AREA'S REALLY RURAL BACK HOME, SO THEN TO MOVE TO A CITY LIKE THIS, IT CAN BE QUITE A CULTURE SHOCK, I'D SAY.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

<sup>b</sup> Here, and for subsequent statistics based on the responses of a subset of our student sample, please see notes in section 10 for sample sizes

## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Where people lived also seemed to make a difference to levels of loneliness. And we go on to discuss the impact of different living arrangements in more detail in section 7.



Levels of loneliness were lower among those living in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) – with 20% of students reporting that they were often or always lonely (the only group who had lower levels of loneliness were those living with their partner and children).

## STAGE OF STUDY

Another factor that students felt was significant was their stage of study. In our focus groups students flagged up a lack of support for postgraduate students.

**THEY DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE EVENTS FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS [...] I THINK EVEN IF YOU'RE A LITTLE BIT MORE MATURE YOU COULD STILL FIND YOURSELF VERY ISOLATED AND VERY LONELY UNLESS IF YOU HAD THE GOOD FRIENDSHIPS. BECAUSE YOU'RE VERY REMOVED, YOU'RE NOT STAYING IN HALLS, YOU DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO BE AT UNIVERSITY 24/7.**

**FEMALE, 25, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, LONDON**

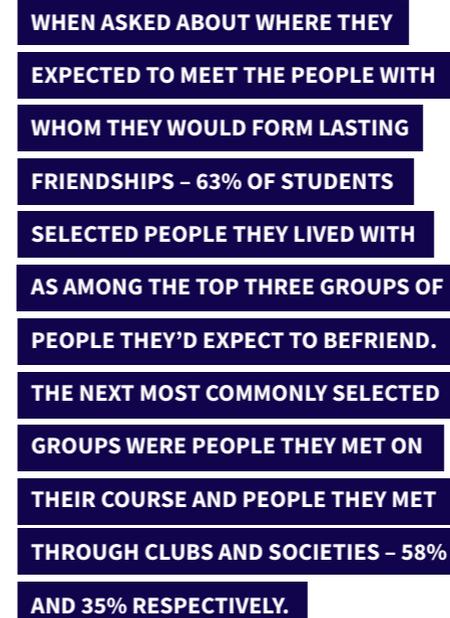
However, in our survey levels of loneliness were slightly higher among those undertaking first degrees, although sample sizes were small for those taking second or higher degrees (23% of first degree students reporting that they were often or always lonely, as compared to 19% of second degree students, 15% of PhD students and only 7% of post-doctoral students). As a result, further research will be needed to understand which students are more vulnerable across different institutions and in relation to factors such as area of study.

# 7

## SUPPORTING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The more that can be done to support students to develop positive and supportive relationships while at university, the fewer students will end up in the damaging trap of chronic loneliness.

Through our survey and in our discussions with students in focus groups we have started to identify some areas in which action might be taken to better support students in their relationships.

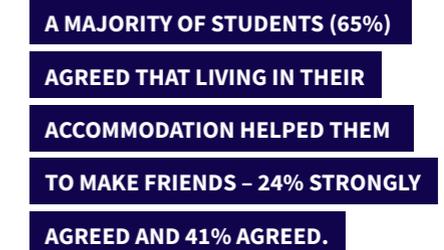


This suggests that the places students live and the ways in which courses and social societies are organised can make a significant difference to students' relationships at university. Below we explore what students told us about their experiences of building friendships at university and how the design of social activities, accommodation and courses helped and hindered them in doing this.

## WHERE WE LIVE MATTERS

### ACCOMMODATION

The findings of our survey suggest that students see their accommodation as an important place for developing friendships and relationships at university. The good news is that the majority of students are positive about the impact of their living arrangements on their relationships.



However, we uncovered some differences in the experiences reported by those living in different types of accommodation:

- Levels of loneliness were higher among students living at home – 24% of those living at home were often or always lonely as compared with 21% of those living away from home.
- Those living away from home were more likely to be positive about their relationships than those living at home – with 60% of those living away from home reporting positive relationships as compared to 44% of those living at home.
- Levels of loneliness were lower among those living in PBSA than those living in other accommodation types with 20% of students living in PBSA reporting that they were often or always

lonely, as compared to 22% living in other types of accommodation.

- Those living in shared houses (70%), or in PBSA (69%) were more likely than average to select 'people you live with' as a group of people with whom they expected to form lasting friendships and more likely to agree that living in their accommodation helped them to make friends – with 75% of those living in PBSA and 72% of those living in shared houses agreeing with this statement.

In general, students recognised that living with people could be a good way of forming friendships and the literature backs the idea that shared living can be beneficial, with some evidence that living in a shared house or flat leads to a better experience at university and that undergraduates who are well integrated with others in their flat or house are less likely to consider dropping out of university than those who are poorly integrated.<sup>57 58</sup>

In our focus groups students spoke about the pros and cons of different living arrangements and what helped and hindered them in making friends.

***I FEEL LIKE WHEN YOU LIVE WITH PEOPLE, YOU'RE KIND OF FORCED TO MAKE A BOND WITH THEM, YOU'RE FORCED TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM BECAUSE YOU SEE THEM EVERY SINGLE DAY.***

**FEMALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

***ESPECIALLY IF YOU COME TO UNI WITHOUT KNOWING ANYONE, I THINK HALLS ARE GREAT, BECAUSE YOU CAN MEET A LOT OF PEOPLE. BUT THEN I THINK LIVING IN A HOUSE IS KIND OF NICER, ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE LIVING WITH PEOPLE YOU LIKE.***

**MALE, 19, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

Students recognised that living at home could leave people feeling isolated and make socialising hard.

***I WAS HAVING TO MAKE A CONSCIOUS EFFORT IN AN HOUR LECTURE OR AN HOUR SEMINAR TO TRY AND MEET NEW PEOPLE. BECAUSE IT'S NOT AS EASY WHEN YOU'RE NOT LIVING ON CAMPUS OR YOU'RE NOT LIVING IN HALLS AND YOU'RE NOT SPENDING AS MUCH TIME IN UNI AS PERHAPS OTHER PEOPLE ARE, TO MEET NEW PEOPLE.***

**MALE, 20, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, MANCHESTER**

However, at the same time students who lived home valued the continuity of staying in touch with older friends.

A key differentiator for many students, in whether they could build their relationships in their accommodation, was the availability of, access to, and quality of communal living areas.

***I STAYED IN PRIVATE HALLS IN MY FIRST YEAR AND ALL THE STUDIOS... SO, EVERYBODY HAD THEIR OWN PRIVATE KITCHEN, SO YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT ANYBODY MAKING A MESS. BUT THEY ALSO HAD COMMUNAL KITCHENS, GYMS AND CINEMA ROOMS AS WELL, SO THERE'S LOADS OF COMMUNAL SPACE. SO, PEOPLE GO TO THEIR ROOM, THEY CAN DO WHAT THEY NEED TO DO, COOK, THEN THEY CAN STILL HAVE COMMUNAL SPACE IF THEY WANT TO AND THAT WORKED REALLY WELL.***

**MALE, 25, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

***I THINK WHEN YOU'RE LIVING IN ACCOMMODATION, I FOUND MYSELF JUST LIVING IN MY ROOM. THERE WAS NO LIVING ROOM, THERE WAS NO COMMUNAL AREA. SO, I'D JUST BE IN MY ROOM ALL DAY, WATCHING STUFF ON MY LAPTOP AND THEN GO TO THE KITCHEN TO EAT. BUT OTHER THAN THAT, I DIDN'T REALLY TALK TO ANYONE ELSE.***

**FEMALE, 20, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

In our survey we found that significant numbers of students were spending large amounts of time alone in their rooms, with students spending on average 4.2 hours a day alone in their room and not asleep. Among those who spent four or more hours a day alone in their rooms (966 students in our survey), the most commonly cited reasons for doing so were to have quiet to study (selected by 56%) or because they enjoyed time alone (selected by 51%). However, 35% of students who spent more than four hours a day alone in their rooms and not sleeping reported that they did so because they did not have friends to spend time with; and 27% said they found spending time with other people difficult.

In our focus groups participants suggested ways in which accommodation providers could support students in making friends where they lived.

These included:

- accommodating students along with others with shared interests;
- offering social activities and groups; and
- improving communal areas.

### THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT

Beyond their accommodation students identified features of their university's wider environments which they also felt made a significant difference to their ability to make friends.

For example, students highlighted the practical challenges of moving around city-based universities, a problem they perceived was not experienced in campus universities.

Some students also highlighted the challenge of finding a sense of belonging in universities which had a strong prevailing culture into which they did not fit.

**UNIVERSITIES HAVE AN ATMOSPHERE, SO, LIKE, THE SU AND THEN THE KIND OF CLUBS THEY PUT ON, I THINK THE OVERALL UNIVERSITY HAS A KIND OF ATMOSPHERE AND YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR SET OF PEOPLE THAT WOULD ATTEND A UNIVERSITY.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, LONDON**

**I THINK ALSO, ESPECIALLY IN LONDON WHEN IT'S OFTEN NOT A CAMPUS UNI, IF YOU DON'T MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE IN YOUR FLAT OR IN YOUR HALLS STRAIGHT AWAY, IT'S QUITE HARD TO GO TO OTHER HALLS AND MAKE OTHER FRIENDS, BECAUSE THEY CAN BE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF LONDON.**

**MALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

### HOW WE LIVE AND WORK MATTERS

It was clear that the structures of student activities – both academic and social – could also have a significant impact on people's ability to forge positive and meaningful relationships.

### COURSE STRUCTURE

In our focus groups students talked about the structure of their courses and explained that some courses were good at enabling students to meet each other regularly, frequently and in small groups - and that this helped them build relationships up over time.

**BECAUSE WHEN YOU'RE IN LECTURES, YOU DON'T NEED ANY EFFORT, YOU JUST SEE THE SAME PEOPLE EVERY DAY, YOU DON'T NEED TO CALL THEM AND MAKE A DATE AND MEET UP OR SOMETHING. YOU JUST SEE THEM, WHETHER YOU WANT TO OR NOT, SO IT'S A BIT EASIER TO FORM A STRONGER BOND THAT WAY.**

**FEMALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN HALLS, LONDON**

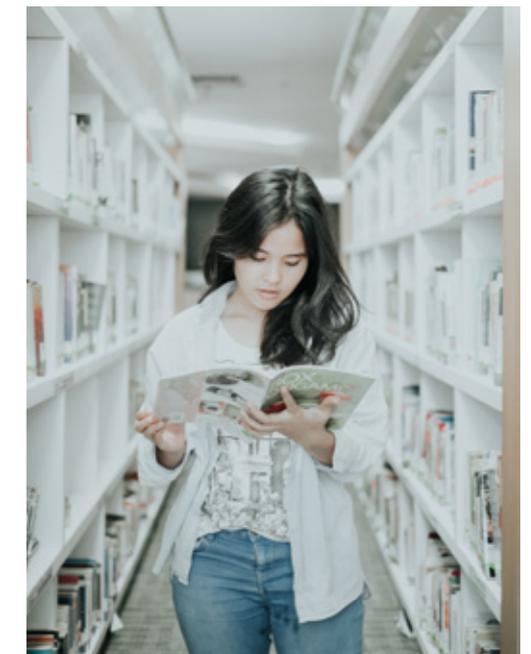
### SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION

Students also recognised a range of more formal structures universities put in place to enable students to get to know one another.

In particular, students talked about the importance of **Freshers' week** activities in creating an opportunity to meet one another and created a distraction from feelings of loneliness and homesickness.

**I GUESS THERE'S MORE STUFF GOING ON WITH FRESHERS', SO YOU'RE ALWAYS OUT AND SOCIALISING, YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO REFLECT.**

**MALE, 19, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**



However, they recognised that for more naturally shy or introverted people these events could be quite intimidating.

*SOMETIMES IT DEPENDS ON PEOPLE'S PERSONALITY. SOME OF THEM ARE, I DON'T KNOW, INTROVERTED, THEY DON'T WANT TO MAYBE GO TO... DURING FRESHERS' WEEK, MAYBE THEY DON'T WANT TO GO TO CLUBS AND PARTY AND STUFF, MAYBE THEY JUST WANT TO CHILL IN A QUIET PLACE, BUT THAT REALLY DOESN'T GO ON IN MAYBE FRESHERS' WEEK.*

FEMALE, 20, INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

*I THOUGHT MY COURSE WAS QUITE GOOD BECAUSE WE KIND OF HAVE LIKE MUMS AND DADS IN THE YEAR ABOVE AND THEN WE KIND OF MEET THEIR FRIENDS AND THEN THEY ORGANISE FOR US TO ALL GO OUT FOR A MEAL LIKE AT THE VERY START OF THE TERM. SO THEN AT LEAST YOU'RE KIND OF MEETING PEOPLE STRAIGHT AWAY.*

FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER

However, some students felt these schemes mainly offered practical support and were not particularly orientated towards supporting people to connect.



Another way in which universities support students to build relationships is through **buddying or mentoring** schemes – and many of our focus group participants had experienced these during their early days at university and had found them helpful.

Students also talked about their experience of **organised social activities** – arranged by academic faculties, student unions, or within accommodation. Many students said they had met people through these events, but they recognised that these may not be that effective in attracting more isolated students.

*THEY COULD BE INTROVERTS INSIDE, SO THEN THEY'RE NOT GOING TO GO DOWNSTAIRS INTO A PLACE LIKE A HALLOWEEN BALL WHERE THEY'RE GOING TO DRESS UP AND THEN LOOK A BIT SILLY, TO GO TO A PLACE WHERE THEY DON'T KNOW WITH PEOPLE THEY DON'T KNOW.*

MALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON

Finally, both in our survey and in our focus groups **clubs and societies** organised around shared interests, and / or characteristics (e.g. for students from a particular home country / LGBT+ students etc.) were recognised as an effective way of making friends.

Students explained how clubs and societies created an easy way of meeting people with shared interests or identities, and created opportunities to meet up regularly to build relationships over time.

*I THINK PEOPLE MAYBE YOU MEET IN THE CLUB OR MAYBE SOME SOCIETY CAN BE A VERY INTIMATE FRIEND [...] AND NOT SO FAR APART AS SOME POTENTIAL FRIENDS CAN.*

FEMALE, 20, INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN HALLS, MANCHESTER



## REGULAR AND FREQUENT CONTACT

A recurring theme in our focus group discussions was the sense of risk that was associated with striking up a new friendship in a more intense social environment, and how social situations that enabled regular and frequent contact with other people could reduce this risk and help people to develop friendships over time.

**I THINK ABOUT IN MORE FORMAL SITUATIONS THERE'S LESS RISK INVOLVED, WHEREAS GOING OUT ON YOUR OWN OR TO A PUB AND MEETING OTHER PEOPLE, IT'S A LOT MORE RISK AND THEN CONFIDENCE KNOCK, I THINK.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**



However, students explained that often the social opportunities offered at university were limited to the initial transition period, or were one-offs. This created pressure around the transition to university and Freshers' week.

**I THINK IN FRESHERS' WEEK WHEN EVERYTHING IS VERY INTENSE AROUND BUILDING THESE NEW FRIENDSHIP GROUPS, AFTERWARDS THESE GROUPS HAVE BEEN CREATED AND TRYING TO... IF YOU'VE NOT BEEN PART OF ONE OF THEM, IF YOU WERE OUTSIDE, TRYING TO GET INTO A GROUP OR FORM A NEW GROUP IS QUITE CHALLENGING FOR SOME PEOPLE.**

**FEMALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

Students said that they would value more opportunities throughout the year and felt there was a case for offering more explicit social support outside the Freshers' week period.

# 8

## GETTING HELP WITH LONELINESS

By ensuring that students' work, social and living environments are organised in ways that support them in building meaningful and positive relationships, we can help to protect people from the risk of chronic loneliness. However, for those who do become lonely, it will be vital that support is available.

When people experience prolonged periods of loneliness it can become self-reinforcing, leading to negative spirals of thinking which cut people off from others further.<sup>59</sup> In these situations, simply making social interaction easier won't be enough, instead people need help to overcome the barriers to connection and to start to build positive relationships again.

Our research suggests that at present there is limited support available, and many students don't know where to turn for help when they are feeling lonely.

**MORE THAN A THIRD OF STUDENTS (35%) SAID THEY WOULD NOT KNOW WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP WITH LONELINESS IF THEY EXPERIENCED IT.**

This was reflected in our focus group discussions, with students unsure about how to find help, and whether help would be available.

**I THINK AT MOST UNI'S THERE ARE SOME FORM OF SUPPORT. I KNOW AT MY UNI THERE ARE, BUT I'M JUST NOT FULLY AWARE OF WHAT THEY ARE.**

**MALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

**I WOULDN'T THINK THAT'S A THING YOU COULD GET HELP FOR.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

## WHERE DO STUDENTS SEEK SUPPORT?

**IN OUR SURVEY, WHEN ASKED ABOUT TO WHOM THEY WOULD TURN FOR HELP IF THEY WERE EXPERIENCING LONELINESS AT UNIVERSITY 63% OF STUDENTS SAID THEY WOULD TURN TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY OUTSIDE UNIVERSITY.**

However, while students may envisage turning to friends in theory, in our focus groups students told us that in practice they had found it challenging to discuss loneliness with friends and family for fear that they might make people feel guilty or worried.

*I DID NOT WANT TO CALL MY PARENTS BACK IN INDIA WHERE THERE'S A HUGE TIME DIFFERENCE AND TELL THEM, BECAUSE THEY CAN'T REALLY DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT SITTING THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY. [...] SO, IT'S SOMETIMES JUST THAT YOU FEEL LIKE IT'S BETTER TO KEEP IT TO YOURSELF AND YOU DON'T WANT TO TROUBLE YOUR LOVED ONES.*

FEMALE, 22, INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON

*IT'S ABOUT NOT MAKING PEOPLE FEEL GUILTY, BECAUSE YOU'VE GOT FRIENDS, THEY ARE YOUR FRIENDS, BUT I CAN'T PUT MY FEELINGS ON SOMEONE ELSE. SO, I THINK FOR ME IT'S LIKE I DON'T WANT TO PUT MY FEELINGS OF LONELINESS ON YOU, BECAUSE YOU HAVEN'T CONTRIBUTED TO THE SITUATION, IF THAT MAKES SENSE.*

FEMALE, 25, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, LONDON

AFTER FRIENDS AND FAMILY, THE NEXT MOST COMMONLY CITED SOURCES OF SUPPORT STUDENTS SAID THEY WOULD TURN TO IF THEY WERE FEELING LONELY WERE OTHER STUDENTS (SELECTED BY 41%) AND UNIVERSITY WELFARE SERVICES (SELECTED BY 27%).

In our focus groups students said that university bodies should take the lead in providing support for people who are lonely, because such provision would be most likely to be trusted by students.

WHEN ASKED ABOUT WHO COULD PLAY AN APPROPRIATE ROLE IN PROVIDING SUPPORT TO STUDENTS WHO WERE LONELY, STUDENT UNIONS (SELECTED BY 50% OF STUDENTS), UNIVERSITY WELFARE SERVICES (SELECTED BY 48% OF STUDENTS) AND OTHER STUDENTS (SELECTED BY 48% OF STUDENTS) WERE MOST COMMONLY CHOSEN BY STUDENTS IN OUR SURVEY.

Clearly these institutions are well placed to provide support, as they already offer services around issues which are linked to loneliness, such as mental health and wellbeing. However, while such services may play a role in supporting people who are lonely, there may also be a need for specialist support specifically aimed at addressing loneliness.

## WHAT SUPPORT DO STUDENTS WANT?

In our literature review we found that there is very little evidence about which interventions are most effective in addressing loneliness among students. University students, staff and healthcare professionals recognise the importance of tackling student loneliness, it's just that how to achieve this is currently unclear.<sup>60</sup> However, the literature that is available demonstrates the potential of the following types of intervention:

**Group activities:** In a small qualitative pilot study of a participatory arts course delivered in one British university, attendees reported that their social relationships had improved over the course of the project.<sup>61</sup> Another study found that participation in group activities was associated with an increase in cross-cultural interaction, suggesting that these could promote social inclusion across different cultures.<sup>62</sup>

**Psychological approaches:** Three studies reporting evidence from outside the UK suggest that mental health interventions and peer-support could help to tackle loneliness and social isolation among students. A review of 26 papers, 14 of which were set in the USA, found that interventions such as cognitive behavior therapy, mind-body-related activities and psycho-educational initiatives can successfully reduce anxiety, depression and stress among students in higher education.<sup>63</sup> Since poor mental health is a risk factor for loneliness, these improvements could also lead to participants feeling less lonely.

**Peer support:** A descriptive study of a peer-mentoring programme implemented in a US university presents training peer-mentors as a feasible strategy, welcomed by students, to enhance university support networks.<sup>64</sup> Findings from Australia suggest that peer-mentors could be particularly helpful for international students: postgraduates from outside the country who took part in a peer-mentoring programme reported that mentors provided the necessary social support, friendship, information and confidence to overcome difficulties including loneliness and barriers to making new friends.<sup>65</sup>

However, when we asked students in our focus groups about the services they might access if they were feeling lonely, they tended to focus primarily on formal support services offering **help with mental wellbeing** such as helplines and university welfare services.

This probably reflects both students' strong sense of the link between loneliness and mental health and the tendency to link loneliness to the student mental health agenda in the wider public discourse.

*I THINK THE NIGHTLINE IS ALL OVER OUR ACCOMMODATION, ON THE DOORS, LIKE SAYING IF YOU'RE LONELY, THEN CONTACT THEM, IT'S QUITE EVIDENT THROUGHOUT THE BUILDINGS.*

MALE, 21, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, MANCHESTER

**EVERYONE ALWAYS TELLS US THAT THERE'S COUNSELLING SERVICE IN THE UNIVERSITY THAT YOU CAN TALK TO.**

**FEMALE, 20, INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

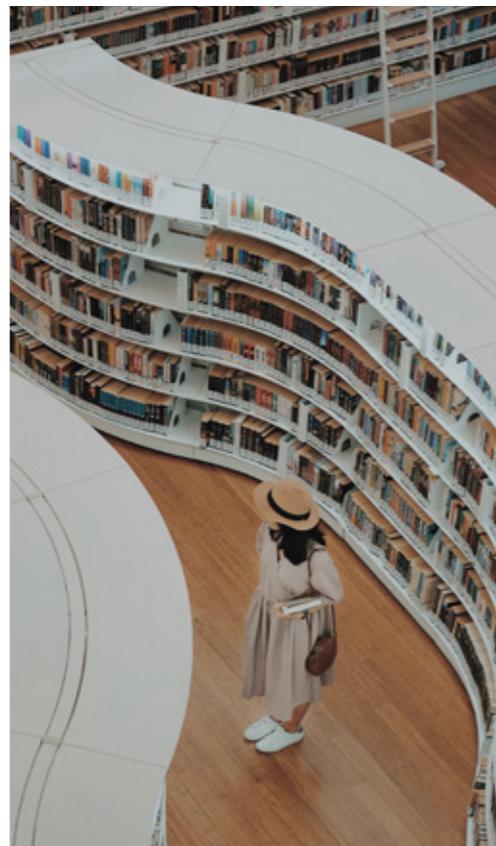
However, it is important to note that despite the increasing focus on student mental health in the public discourse, the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy is warning that in practice university counselling services are increasingly being cut back.<sup>66</sup>

In considering how students might access support with loneliness, participants in our focus groups talked about the role of advertising, and said that they would like to access services via their mobile phones. Students also recognised the role that personal tutors might be expected to play in directing people to support. However, there was a high degree of scepticism as to whether this would be an effective or appropriate route to support in practice.



**AT UNI I THINK THERE'S A SUGGESTION THAT SOMEONE LIKE A PERSONAL TUTOR MIGHT BE SOMEONE YOU COULD GO TO. BUT I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I'D FEEL COMFORTABLE GOING TO SOMEONE WHO IS PURELY AN ACADEMIC AND PURELY THERE TO TEACH YOU, TO DISCUSS A PERSONAL ISSUE, CERTAINLY A MENTAL ISSUE.**

**MALE, 20, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING AT HOME, MANCHESTER**



Offering support in building **social and relationship skills and attitudes** was also considered as a potential way of helping people to overcome loneliness. Some students had vague awareness of support offers that could be relevant, but were not clear about what was available or how helpful it would be.

**I THINK WHEN I STARTED UNI, THERE WAS FEW LIKE LITTLE GUIDES AND TIPS THAT YOU COULD FIND ONLINE OR WHATEVER, JUST SAYING HOW YOU CAN MAKE FRIENDS AND THINGS. BUT I THINK ONE THING WAS... ONE OF THE POINTS WAS GET A DOORSTOP FOR YOUR DOOR IN HALLS, SO THAT YOUR FLATMATES CAN KNOW THAT YOU'RE OPEN FOR A CHAT OR WHATEVER. BUT WHEN WE'RE ACTUALLY IN HALLS THAT WASN'T ALLOWED BECAUSE OF FIRE SAFETY, SO THAT WAS A PROBLEM.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

However, students were concerned about whether these services would be attractive in practice and whether stigma or lack of acknowledgement that there was a problem might mean the most lonely people were put off

using these services. Most felt that social skills training would be more appropriately delivered to younger people – for example in schools.

### **BARRIERS TO SUPPORT**

While students felt that there were a range of services that could help people in overcoming loneliness, they recognised that there were barriers to accessing support which needed to be overcome.

The **stigma** of loneliness<sup>67</sup> was perceived to be a significant barrier to seeking support, which could compound the wider sense of stigma around seeking help<sup>68</sup>, creating real challenges to accessing support. Students also mentioned being “shy” and “embarrassment” and “anxiety” as key barriers.

**NO ONE WANTS TO SAY, 'I'M LONELY'. NOT NECESSARILY BECAUSE YOU'RE EMBARRASSED, BUT BECAUSE THEN YOU'RE ACTUALLY SAYING 'YES, I'M SAD'.**

**MALE, 19, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**

In relation to accessing social opportunities and joining in with activities, students recognised that there were significant barriers to **taking the first step** to connection and that therefore students who were lonely might need extra help in accessing social opportunities.

**THE PROBLEM IS THE PEOPLE WHO FEEL LONELY, THEY USUALLY FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE TO ADMIT THAT THEY ARE LONELY AND GO TO THAT SESSION EVEN. SO, THEY WILL KEEP THEMSELVES BEING LONELY IN THEIR ROOM AND THEY WILL NOT ATTEND ANY EVENT OF THAT, THEY WILL NOT MAKE USE OF IT.**

**FEMALE, 24, INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, MANCHESTER**

Students argued that there were a number of actions which could be taken to reduce the barriers to accessing help. These included:

- Offering people help with taking the first step into social situations.

By making sure people felt invited, giving people the opportunity to come to events with another person such as a friend or family member, and using social media to initiate contact before meeting face to face.

- Encouraging discussion about loneliness.

**SOMETIMES YOU WOULDN'T THINK YOU'RE LONELY BECAUSE YOU'RE SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE [...] EVERYONE'S SPEAKING MORE AND MORE ABOUT ALL THESE OTHER THINGS, BUT LONELINESS ISN'T REALLY SOMETHING THAT'S SPOKEN ABOUT AND I THINK PEOPLE MIGHT NOT REALLY IDENTIFY WITH WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS TO BE LONELY.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

- Making information on support widely available.

For example by using widespread advertising and social media to draw attention to sources of support.

- Offering the option to be anonymous.

**FROM THE FRIENDS I'VE SPOKEN TO IN TERMS OF THE COUNSELLING SERVICES, THEY'VE SAID THEY'VE ALWAYS FOUND IT GOOD THAT IT WAS CONFIDENTIAL, AND IT'S CLEARLY STATED WHEN YOU FIRST START UNIVERSITY, SO AT LEAST YOU'VE KIND OF GOT THAT. [...] SO, I THINK THAT KIND OF HELPS IF YOU KNOW, OH RIGHT IT'S VERY PRIVATE.**

**FEMALE, 22, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, MANCHESTER**



- Offering support online and via mobile devices.

**I THINK THEY ARE QUITE USEFUL, BECAUSE LIKE IT'S BEEN SAID BEFORE, WE'RE ALWAYS ON OUR PHONES NOW. IT'S JUST AN EASY ACCESS WAY TO GET THE HELP THAT YOU NEED. I FEEL LIKE IT'S JUST EASILY ACCESSIBLE, VERY AVAILABLE, IT'S JUST HANDY WHEN YOU WANT IT. AND ALSO LIKE YOU SAID ABOUT APPS AND STUFF LIKE THAT, ABOUT BUMBLE AND STUFF LIKE THAT, IT MAKES IT MORE FUN, MORE INTERACTIVE.**

**FEMALE, 18, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, LONDON**

- Proactively raising the issue of loneliness.

***I THINK THE THING WITH PERSONAL TUTORS IS IF THEY START THE CONVERSATION THEN IT'S EASIER TO TALK ABOUT IT. IT'S A WHOLE OTHER THING TO START THE CONVERSATION AND SEEK HELP. [...] THEY DON'T HAVE TO BE YOUR COUNSELLOR, BUT THEY CAN SAY, OH, IF YOU DO FEEL THIS WAY, THEN YOU CAN DO THIS.***

**FEMALE, 20, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN SHARED HOUSING, LONDON**

While students felt that it was important not to stigmatise people by making them feel singled out for support, it was recognised that some groups might be particularly at risk of loneliness and could be offered additional support. Groups highlighted included people who were the first generation in their families to go to university, care leavers, and people with learning disabilities, or with Asperger's or autism.

### **STUDENTS SUPPORTING STUDENTS: A ROLE FOR PEER SUPPORT?**

While students in our focus groups were clear that universities needed to take responsibility for supporting

students who were lonely, they also recognised that peer-to-peer support could play a significant role in helping people to overcome loneliness.

***IF THERE'S OTHER PEOPLE AROUND YOU WHO HAVE SAID, 'I'M FEELING THE SAME WAY', THEN THAT MIGHT BE BETTER AS A SUPPORT GROUP, BECAUSE THERE'S A NETWORK OF PEOPLE WHO ARE FEELING THE SAME WAY THAT YOU DO. RATHER THAN SOMEONE SOLELY JUST THERE, WHO YOU KNOW ARE THERE FOR THE PURPOSE OF THEY'RE DOING THEIR JOB AND TRYING TO GET TO THE BOTTOM LINE OF WHY YOU FEEL LONELY. BUT IF THERE'S OTHER PEOPLE AROUND YOU, WHO SAID 'YES, I'M LONELY AS WELL', THEN YOU MIGHT FEEL AT EASE AND THINKING THAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE IN THE SAME BOAT AS ME, SO I CAN LIKE... I DON'T HAVE TO BE AFRAID TO SAY YOU'RE LONELY, SORT OF THING.***

**MALE, 21, DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT, LIVING IN PBSA, MANCHESTER**

**IN OUR SURVEY THE MAJORITY (64%) OF STUDENTS REPORTED THAT THEY WOULD FEEL CONFIDENT IN REACHING OUT TO SOMEONE WHO WAS LONELY - WITH 14% VERY CONFIDENT AND 50% SOMEWHAT CONFIDENT.**

And there is already some evidence that peer support models may have the potential to be effective in addressing loneliness among students.<sup>69</sup>

Peer support could play a role across the spectrum of loneliness interventions, and could take many forms including:

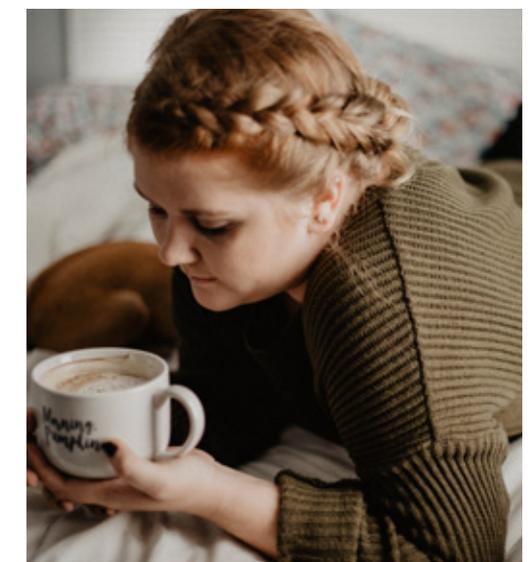
- Student-to-student buddying schemes – for example to support people in taking the first step into social groups.
- Peer support groups for students who experience barriers to social connection.
- Peer-to-peer training in social skills and confidence development.

As discussed, several students in our focus groups had experienced peer support models such as buddying and mentoring schemes linked to academic courses or within PBSA, but as yet few schemes have been developed with a specific focus on loneliness and social isolation.

**ONLY 18% OF STUDENTS SAID THEY DID NOT FEEL IT WAS THEIR PLACE TO SUPPORT LONELY STUDENTS, AND 9% SAID THEY DID NOT WANT TO SUPPORT LONELY PEOPLE. THE MOST COMMONLY CITED REASONS STUDENTS SAID THEY WOULD HESITATE IN REACHING OUT TO SOMEONE WHO WAS LONELY WERE BECAUSE THEY WOULD NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY (54% CHOSE THIS) OR WOULD BE SCARED TO SAY THE WRONG THING (CHOSEN BY 52%).**

Our findings suggest that, particularly if training were provided, there may be significant numbers of students willing to engage in both the creation and implementation of peer support models or wider community led solutions for combatting loneliness.

Peer support is therefore a potentially fruitful avenue to explore in the development of future models of support.



In this report we have explored the factors that affect students' ability to form positive relationships, what helps and hinders students in making friends at university, and what might be done to support students who experience loneliness while at university.

Through our review of existing evidence and through the new insights we have drawn out of our survey and focus groups we have found that:

- The majority of students are positive about their relationships at university and do not experience chronic loneliness.
- However, some students find their relationships at university do not match up to their expectations, and more than one in five students experience chronic loneliness.
- Loneliness among students is linked to negative outcomes including poor mental and physical health, and higher risk of dropping out.
- Students face a number of challenges in building meaningful and positive relationships at university, including in particular:
  - The impact of the transition to university
  - Lack of social skills and confidence
  - Mental health issues
  - Stress caused by academic work and other pressures
  - Unrealistic expectations and perceptions

- Students need regular, and frequent contact with other people to build relationships – the design of accommodation and structures of student life can support students in meeting each other in this way.
- Where students live can have a real impact on their experience of making and maintaining friends at university.
- The structure of university courses and the way in which social activities are organised also make a difference to how easy or hard it is to build good quality relationships.
- Students who are lonely need support, including with underlying issues such as relationship skills, mental health and confidence.
- Students can find it hard to reach out for help and support – but talking more about relationships and about loneliness can help to break down the stigma.
- Peer support may be a fruitful avenue to explore for developing new support services.

As Relate and iQ continue to work together in partnership they will draw on the insights from this report, working with students and other experts to develop practical ideas for supporting and enabling more students to improve their wellbeing by building and maintaining meaningful, healthy and positive relationships as they live, work and socialise at university.

This report was commissioned to investigate the experience of loneliness among students in the UK. Its focus was on understanding the nature of the experience of loneliness, its causes and consequences and what action could be taken to address loneliness among students.

A particular emphasis of the research was on the potential role of university accommodation providers in supporting students to build and maintain relationships. The intention of the research was to inform further service development and experimentation by partners Relate and iQ.

The report has been informed by research undertaken during 2018. This involved:

- A systematic review of literature on loneliness and students.
- Quantitative analysis of two datasets to draw out fresh insight into students' social relationships in the UK: the Community Life Survey 2016-2017, and Next Steps 2009.
- A survey of 2004 current students and 1027 parents of young people who were students or who planned to start university in September carried out by Censuswide.
- Focus groups in London and Manchester which took place in November 2018.

More information on the methods for each of these research elements is set out below, along with important qualifications to our findings.

### LITERATURE REVIEW: METHODS

A systematic review of literature was conducted according to the guidelines set out in the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination guidance on undertaking reviews.<sup>70</sup>

Evidence was identified via a systematic search for published and grey literature indexed in the following electronic databases: PsycINFO (Ovid), the Social Science Premium Collection, PROSPERO, Google Scholar, Google and ETHOS. An example of how free text terms and subject heading terms were combined to produce a sensitive search strategy is provided in the Appendix.

Additional sources were identified and forwarded by Relate and iQ.

Our search strategy targeted studies on student and younger adult (aged 18-30) populations. Priority was given to identifying the most recent UK-based studies, as it was felt that older evidence and studies conducted in other settings would have limited applicability to the British context. This was also a pragmatic decision, given the short timeframe of this review project and the potentially large number of studies which one would have to screen if searches were extended to the international literature. Nonetheless, where a non-UK source was identified, and it was felt to add to the British-based literature, it was sourced and included in the review.

For each of the sources identified, data on the study aim, design and main findings were extracted and tabulated. While no formal appraisal of the evidence was conducted, data on sample type and size and study methods can be used to gauge the generalisability of findings when writing-up the findings.

A full write up of the literature review can be obtained from Relate.

### **DATA ANALYSIS: METHODS**

Below we set out the methods for our analyses of the Community Life Survey 2016-17 and the sixth wave of the Next Steps survey. A full write up of this analysis can be obtained from Relate.

### **COMMUNITY LIFE SURVEY 2016-17**

We obtained the dataset for the Community Life Survey 2016-2017 from the UK Data Service ([www.ukdataservice.ac.uk](http://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk)) and analysed it using the software Stata version 14.2. ([www.stata.com](http://www.stata.com)).

We explored the following variables:

- Demographic variables including age, gender, ethnicity, working status and student status.
- Experience of loneliness was based on answers to the question ‘How often do you feel lonely?’
- Living arrangements and contact with family and friends outside one’s household were based on a number of questions about living arrangements and frequency of contact.

- Experience of social isolation was based on people’s living arrangement and contact with family and friends outside the household.

Associations between variables were investigated using Pearson’s chi-square test. The statistical significance level used was 5%.

**Qualifying our findings:** The number of students in the Community Life Survey is 939. This is greater than some of the subsample sizes used in analyses conducted by the Office for National Statistics to determine the characteristics and determinants of loneliness (see the Technical Report for the Community Life Survey analyses published in April 2018, ‘Loneliness - What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?’<sup>71</sup> - the number of unemployed participants was 60). However, we should be cautious about generalising our findings to the student population in England.

### **NEXT STEPS (SIXTH WAVE)**

We obtained the dataset for the sixth wave<sup>72</sup> of Next Steps (previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, LSYPE) from the UK Data Service ([www.ukdataservice.ac.uk](http://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk)) and analysed it using the software Stata version 14.2. ([www.stata.com](http://www.stata.com)).

We explored a number of variables including student status, whether university had been better or worse than expected, unanticipated features of attending university, and whether respondents had experienced bullying.

We considered various issues relating to friendship including the number of close friends based on the question ‘How many close friends do you have – that is friends you could talk to if you were in some sort of trouble?’ and we also explored whether people felt having close friends or close ties with family was more important. We also explored sources of support including emotional support and information and advice about the future.

**Qualifying our findings:** Next Steps participants were all born in England in either 1989 or 1990. We cannot therefore assume that our findings are generalizable to students who were born elsewhere or later.

### **SURVEY OF STUDENTS (BY CENSUSWIDE)**

Censuswide surveyed current students and parents of young people who were students or who planned to start university in September via online survey. 2004 students responded to the student survey. 1027 parents responded to the parents’ survey. The survey was conducted in GB between 25.07.2018 and 01.08.2018. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

The sample was drawn from Censuswide’s panel, with students and parents of students identified through Censuswide’s profiling questionnaire. Respondents completed a screening survey to opt into the survey and to verify they met the requirements of the survey.

**Qualifying our findings:** Due to the relatively small sample size,

and the fact that samples were not recruited to be representative, and were not weighted, findings may not be generalisable to the student population as a whole.

Sample sizes for questions based on subsets of our sample (described in chapters 6 and 7) are as follows:

- Year of study:
  - First – 837
  - Second – 642
  - Third – 308
  - Fourth + - 217
- Gender:
  - Female – 1458
  - Male – 546
- Degree studied for:
  - First – 1540
  - Second – 362
  - PhD – 73
  - Post-Doctoral – 29
- Living:
  - At home - 590
  - Away - 1307
  - About the same time at home and away – 177
- Accommodation:
  - PBSA - 780
  - Shared house or flat – 446

### **FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups were held in Manchester and London during November 2018, facilitated by Kate Jopling. Students taking part in the groups attended a variety of higher education institutions in London and Manchester.

Nine students were recruited to each focus group by Acumen Fieldwork using their London and Manchester databases against a screener. Five students for each group were

recruited in person inside iQ's student accommodation in the relevant city. 12 students attended the Manchester focus group and 13 students attended the London focus group.

Students recruited via Acumen's database completed a screening questionnaire to meet sample requirements. Those recruited in iQ accommodation were recruited in person through door knocking. Those interested in taking part in the research were asked further screening questions to ensure a spread of respondents.

Each group was recruited to include an even split by gender, a mix of ages between 18-25, four BAME

respondents per group, a mix of undergraduate and postgraduates, at least four international students per group, and students living in a mix of accommodation types (including living alone / sharing a flat or house, living at home with parents, and living in halls).

**Qualifying our findings:** The small sample sizes, and limited number of institutions of study from which students in our focus groups were drawn mean findings may not be generalisable to the whole student population. In particular, findings from the groups will not be representative of the views of more mature students.



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