



End of Year 1 Report for Queen Margaret University

The key purposes of this report are to:-

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Theme activity that has taken place over the year
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be about 6 to 8 sides of A4 in length.

Institutional team

Identify any changes in Theme leadership, TLG and institutional team membership since details were reported in the institutional plan developed at the start of the academic year.

Since we submitted our institutional plan for 2020-21, we have added the following new members to the Team (listed in alphabetical order):

Dr Gemma Blackledge-Foughali, Associate Head, Division of Business, Enterprise and Management

Aasiyah Patankar, Student President (Aasiyah replaces our outgoing Student President, Chiara Menozzi, on the Team)

Mhairi Robertson, Assistant Lecturer, Division of Psychology, Sociology and Enterprise

Ann Turner, Senior Lecturer, Media, Communication and Performing Arts

Evaluation of activities/outcomes

To make evaluation processes more accessible and user friendly, we have attempted to simplify (not minimise) the evaluation reporting process into 7 key questions (see below). Prior to completing these, it would be useful to refer to the QAAS website resource: [A Guide to Basic Evaluation in HE](#) (specifically, Section 8, Summary overview on page 23, and the Evaluation Checklist – Appendix A, on pages 28-29).

Please report each activity/intervention against the following questions in the Evaluation part of the template.

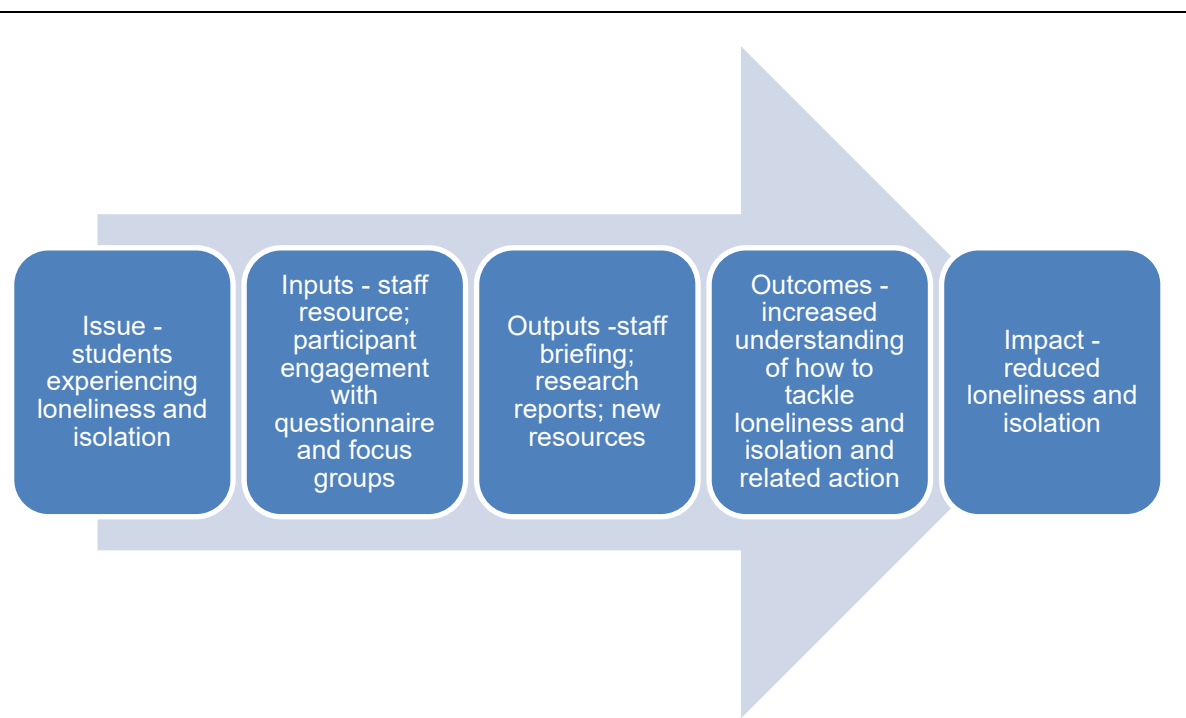
N. B. You may have already realised some of your objectives and/or these might be ongoing, so please delineate each question according to whether activities or interventions have been completed already in this reporting year or are in process.

(Easiest way is to delete **either/or** options highlighted in **red** in questions below):

Evaluation

Please complete the following 7 questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary)

Title of project/activity
Lonely Learning and learning to be lonely: a study of student resilience and challenge during COVID-19 lockdown
1. What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
The overall purpose of our project is to explore student experiences of loneliness and isolation and identify strategies that may have been used to manage these experiences. Our key objectives are to raise awareness of the student experience, to enhance staff and student understanding, to promote existing resources and approaches, and to develop new resources to mitigate loneliness and isolation, where these are detrimental to the individual. We have developed two questionnaires as detailed further below. We have secured ethical approval for both of these. As well as producing an internal report, we anticipate that we may be able to write up the research for publication and/or that the results may be presented at an academic conference, or distributed through other channels of research dissemination. We have allocated some of our Enhancement Themes budget to recruit two part-time Research Assistants, who are leading on this work together with our Head of Psychology, Sociology and Education. A student questionnaire, open to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students and to doctoral candidates. This questionnaire asks students about various aspects of the student experience related to loneliness and isolation. The questionnaire was open between March and June 2021. We are now in the analysis phase, and plan to hold a focus group with some of the respondents. The purpose of the focus group will be to gain more in-depth understanding of the findings that arise during the analysis. A staff questionnaire, open to all academic and professional service staff. This questionnaire invites staff to reflect on various aspects of the student experience related to loneliness and isolation. It does not address staff views on their own feelings of loneliness and isolation. The questionnaire opened earlier in June 2021 and will run for approximately two months, following which the results will be subject to analysis. We expect to contact some of the staff respondents to gather further information about resources and approaches/strategies they have used or developed to support students. The questionnaire and focus group data will be considered together with other data we hold on student experiences of loneliness and isolation, for example NSS and other survey results. Whilst the NSS and our internal student experience survey (the QSS) do not ask directly about loneliness and isolation, some of the question banks provide helpful related information. The qualitative comments from these surveys are particularly useful. Once the analysis phase is complete, we expect to be able to identify existing resources and approaches/strategies that can usefully be shared more widely. We also expect to be able to identify gaps, which we then hope to address through targeted interventions. Our logic model is provided below:



2. Why **are we making** it? (Rationale for the change)

As an early output from our Themes work (February 2021), we developed an expert staff briefing on loneliness and isolation (attached to this submission). The following extract from the briefing explains to our staff community why we are investigating this topic at QMU.

Included in the growing literature reporting on loneliness amongst particular groups is growing evidence of reported loneliness in the student bodyⁱ. Studies investigating associations with cultureⁱⁱ; genderⁱⁱⁱ social media^{iv}, internet^v, smartphone use^{vi}, attachment^{vii}, mental distress^{viii}, academic performance^{ix} and social identity^x are but a few of the areas under the microscope of social science. What we do know is that there is a growing number of students who report feeling lonely with the Unite annual survey of 2019^{xi} suggesting that as many as one in four students feels lonely 'often' or 'all of the time'.

The restrictions on in person learning and social activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic during academic session 2020/2021 are highly likely to have exacerbated the situation, and this is confirmed by a recent survey of students studying at Scottish HEIS¹. It is during this period that we decided to undertake this project exploring loneliness at QMU and find out which systems, structures and support mechanisms exist for students who may be experiencing this very human, but nevertheless distressing emotional and psychological state.

¹ In a Youth Sight poll commissioned by Universities Scotland, 77% of students said that significant restrictions on in-person learning last year had a slight or strong negative impact on them feeling lonely. YouthSight spoke to a sample of 552 students, a combination of Scottish-domiciled applicants to start at Scottish universities next academic year and students already enrolled at Scottish universities across three weeks in May 2021.

3. What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)
The most important difference that we hope will occur is a reduced detrimental impact of loneliness and isolation on the student experience. We expect that the following outcomes will underpin this overall objective: • Increased student awareness of/engagement with resources and approaches/strategies to address feelings of loneliness and isolation. • Increased staff awareness and signposting of resources and approaches/strategies to address students' feelings of loneliness and isolation.
4. How will we know? (How is the change measured)
We are considering reissuing the student questionnaire in 2022, with some modifications to allow us to compare the student experience of loneliness and isolation in 2022 with the 2021 experience. Should we proceed with this, we will also be able to gain an insight into whether students' awareness and use of QMU services had changed. Similarly, we will compare NSS and QSS results to determine whether levels of loneliness and isolation have decreased. We acknowledge that it will be very difficult to gauge progress, and also that it will not be possible to determine with any degree of certainty the extent to which feelings of loneliness and isolation are directly linked to the circumstances arising from COVID restrictions.
5. Who has been/is involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)
Our Institutional Team has oversight of judgements on effectiveness. The Team reports to the Student Experience Committee, allowing for wider input from academic and professional services staff, and students. We are currently reviewing our Student Experience Strategy (SES), and we will capture some of the work of the Institutional Team within our actions and activities for the coming five year period. As part of the SES review, we are considering approaches to measuring the (arguably) immeasurable aspects of enhancement initiatives, and any decisions arising through the SES review will also inform the approach of the Institutional Team.
6. Any lessons learned to apply already? (Applied ongoing learning)
At this stage, it is too early to identify any lessons learned. However, we have been interested to note the high level of student engagement with the topic of loneliness and isolation, as evidenced by the questionnaire response rate and the number of students indicating that they would be happy to be contacted for the focus groups.
7. Any things you have stopped/need to stop doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)
Having considered carefully the scope of the project, we took the decision not to include our TNE students in phase one of our activity. QMU has a large overseas collaborative student population (43% of our total student numbers). Through programme approval, and

other established quality processes, we oversee equivalence of the student experience at each of our partner institutions. In practice this means that we have delegated to our partners the responsibility to deliver student support, including support for students experiencing challenges as a result of loneliness and isolation. Within this delegated structure, it would not be appropriate for us to investigate the student experience through the same questionnaires that we have used for on-campus students and distance learners. We would also not be in a position to commit to the delivery of additional resources at each of our overseas sites.

However, we do recognise that there are likely to be generic outputs from the present study, which might be transferable to other contexts. This is something we will explore further in year two of the theme, at which point we will also consider whether any additional engagement with TNE staff and students could be beneficial.

Dissemination of work

Which mechanisms have been most effective in disseminating outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector? Please provide examples.

If there are materials and resources you can share with the sector, please provide details below.

- We have developed an Enhancement Themes Intranet site as a 'one stop shop' for all staff and doctoral candidates. We use the site to update the staff and doctoral candidate community on the work of the QMU Institutional Team as well as sector developments, including upcoming events.
- Our Institutional Team members act as Themes Champions with a remit to raise awareness of the Theme within their local academic and professional services Divisions.
- The Institutional Team reports to our Student Experience Committee and also to the School Academic Boards.
- We have included updates on our Themes work in the Graduate School Newsletter and on the VLE for our doctoral candidates.
- We are working in partnership with our incoming Student President to explore ways of engaging more widely with our undergraduate and taught postgraduate student community.

We have attached our expert staff briefing on loneliness and isolation.

Collaboration outwith your institution

How have you collaborated with other institutions? This could be informally by growing networks or contacts, or more formally for example, through collaborative clusters or sector work. If you have been collaborating with others, briefly explain what this has involved and what have been the benefits and challenges.

QMU colleagues, including members of the Institutional Team, have engaged with sector work, such as the sector evaluation workshop, and collaborative cluster activity. Collaborative cluster work is promoted through the University's Enhancement Theme Intranet site. While we do not monitor colleagues' engagement with that work directly, we are aware that there has been particular interest in the Decolonising the Curriculum

cluster, and colleagues reported very positively on the QAA webinar they attended on that topic.

Beyond this activity, formal collaboration with other institutions on Enhancement Theme work has been limited, a consequence of the combined effect of being a relatively small institution, and the impact of the pandemic on staff capacity beyond the delivery of learning and teaching.

Supporting staff and student engagement

How have staff and students been supported to engage in Theme activities? Please provide examples.

Please see the comments above on committee remits and Team members' engagement as Divisional Champions.

All QMU staff and students have been invited to engage with this particular Theme through the questionnaires on loneliness and isolation. Within the recruitment materials, and Participant Information Sheets, we raise awareness of the Themes.

Staff are guided to the Themes, in some cases, as an outcome from the Performance Enhancement Review (PER) process. This has led to at least one new member joining the Team. Staff are also encouraged to engage with the Themes through our Annual Monitoring and review processes.

Processes

What are you learning from the processes, approaches and structures you are using to support this Theme?

How will this report be used/distributed within your institution?

For this particular Theme we established a core research group to lead on the development of the expert staff briefing, and the design and analysis of the questionnaires. We have found this approach to be of value, as it has ensured we have both subject and methodological expertise. Our researchers have involved the wider Team in all key decisions, thereby ensuring that there is a good balance of more focussed work and wider engagement.

We welcome the publication of The Guide to Effective Evaluation in HE, and we will use this to inform our projects in year two of the Theme. On a broader institutional level, staff and students involved in our Student Experience Committee projects will be directed towards this resource to help us build evaluation into all of our activities.

How we will use/distribute this report

This report will be published on our Enhancement Themes Intranet site, which is accessible to all staff. It will also be shared through senior committees, including the Student Experience Committee, School Academic Boards and Graduate School Academic Board.

Report Author:	Professor Richard Butt, RLC Staff Lead
Date:	June 2021



Briefing

2020-21 Enhancement Theme at QMU: Loneliness and Isolation



Scotland's Enhancement Themes

The national programme of [Enhancement Themes](#) is managed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland. It aims to improve the learning experience of students studying within the Scottish higher education sector. This is achieved by the sector identifying and agreeing to work on specific areas (known as Themes). Within each Theme, institutions, academic staff, professional services staff, and students are encouraged to work together to generate ideas and find innovative ways to enhance the learning experience of students. Each Theme allows the sector to share and learn from current and innovative national and international practice. The current Theme is called [Resilient Learning Communities](#) and runs from July 2020 to July 2023.

QMU's Institutional Enhancement Themes Team

We have established an Institutional Team to identify and lead priority projects for QMU under the umbrella of the Resilient Learning Communities Theme. The Team is chaired by Professor Richard Butt, Deputy Principal. Richard is our Staff Lead for the Theme. Our Student Lead is Linnea Wallen, PhD Candidate. We have decided to focus on loneliness and isolation in year one of the Theme. Our key objectives are to raise awareness of the experience of loneliness and isolation, to enhance understanding of the means by which these can be managed, and to develop resources to mitigate loneliness and isolation, where these are detrimental to the individual. This short paper is the first of the Institutional Team's outputs. In the paper we provide an overview of loneliness and isolation and explain why we want to explore loneliness and isolation at QMU.

The Next Steps

We plan to launch a staff questionnaire in semester two to gather further information about existing resources and strategies to help manage loneliness and isolation. In the questionnaire we will gather feedback on the type of support and resources that might be useful for the University community. We also plan to develop a separate student questionnaire to gather student feedback on factors contributing to loneliness and isolation, and examples of strategies and practice that have helped students experiencing difficulties as a result of loneliness and isolation. We will follow up on the questionnaire responses with focus groups later in the year. When developing the questionnaires, we will consider carefully how to separate and understand those factors that relate directly to COVID-19 from wider circumstances contributing to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Expected Outputs and Impact

The main purpose of the Enhancement Themes is to improve the student experience. We expect that we will generate resources through this project that are useful for students experiencing loneliness and isolation, and helpful to staff supporting students experiencing loneliness and isolation. We plan to hold dissemination events over the three-year period for the current Theme, where we can showcase the work that has been undertaken, and provide a forum for discussion and exchange of practice. As the Themes are a Scotland-wide initiative, we will also have opportunities to share our work at Enhancement Themes events and to publish on the Enhancement Themes website and more widely.

How you can get involved

We would encourage you to complete the staff questionnaire once this is available. You can also speak with any member of the Institutional Team if you would like further information about our work and ways to contribute. A full list of Team Members is available on the Enhancement Themes Intranet Site.

Background

Loneliness, termed a modern epidemic since as far back as 1998^{xii}, has even been seen as 'The Leprosy of the 21st Century'^{xiii} and indeed, a raft of evidence suggests that a substantial proportion of today's Western populations is lonely.^{xiv} Amidst this international rise in concern, the UK government appointed a Minister for Loneliness in 2018, although it was less forthcoming about how the post might intersect with austerity targets that included cuts to social care and welfare benefit, which created demographic inequalities in the experience of loneliness. Both fueling and underpinning the chatter regarding loneliness, the policy focus and the anecdotal outpouring is a growing body of 'loneliness study' which evidences alarming consequences of loneliness for cognition, behaviour, emotion and both physical and mental health^{xv}, and even suggests a correlation with earlier mortality.^{xvi} That said, loneliness, a complex human phenomenon, is only partially exposed or explored through the metrics employed in the studies, many of which rely heavily on scales, predominantly the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) loneliness scale. There is less focus on the phenomenological or socioecological perspective on loneliness, which is needed in order to drill into how objective social and physical environments, not just the subjective perception or construal of these environments, impact on one's thinking, feeling, and behaviours.^{xvii}

What is it?

Loneliness is complex, subject to temporal shifts, shaped by cultural and gender determinants^{xviii} and socially constructed^{xix}. In keeping with the Loneliness Strategy^{xx} loneliness is defined as: "a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship." It may arise from a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want. Therefore, it is susceptible to the vagaries of discrepancy thinking and vulnerable to comparisons with others, which some have noted as fuelled by social media. Loneliness is not one emotion, but a cluster of emotions^{xxi} that also shift and change over time. It is important not to confuse loneliness and social isolation, although they may be linked.

Social isolation is a measure of the number of contacts that people have and whether they are able to function with these contacts and networks. In 2003 Public Health England

defined it as “an absence of social interactions, social support structures and engagement with wider community activities or structures.” It is qualitatively different, then, to loneliness, and more easily addressed. It is also important not to confuse either loneliness or social isolation with **solitude**, a state of voluntary aloneness, during which personality development and creative activity may take place. This less pathologising view of being alone with one’s self is largely lost in today’s hyperconnected society, in which being alone is invariably negatively perceived and due to which, some are beginning to argue, there may be negative impacts on developmental pathways.^{xxii} In short, it may be that as we become more anxious about being lonely (as we absorb the deficit discourse about being alone), the levels of our tolerance are being eroded more, and we may have even fewer opportunities to develop the capacity to be alone^{xxiii} and even thrive through solitude.

Why explore loneliness at QMU?

Included in the growing literature reporting on loneliness amongst particular groups is growing evidence of reported loneliness in the student body^{xxiv}. Studies investigating associations with culture^{xxv}; gender^{xxvi} social media^{xxix}, attachment^{xxx}, mental distress^{xxxi}, academic performance and social identity^{xxxix} are but a few of the areas under the microscope of social science. What we do know is that there is a growing number of students who report feeling lonely with the Unite annual survey of 2019 suggesting that as many as one in four students feels lonely ‘often’ or ‘all of the time’. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 – 2021 is highly likely to have exacerbated the situation, and it is during this period that we decided to undertake this project exploring loneliness at QMU and find out which systems, structures and support mechanisms exist for students who may be experiencing this very human, but nevertheless distressing emotional and psychological state.

ⁱ Diehl K, Jansen C, Ishchanova K, Hilger-Kolb J. (2018). Loneliness at Universities: Determinants of Emotional and Social Loneliness among Students. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 15(9):1865. Published 2018 Aug 29. doi:10.3390/ijerph15091865

ⁱⁱ Bauer N., Rokach A. (2004). The experience of loneliness in university: A cross-cultural study. *Int. J. Adolesc. Youth*. 11:283–302. doi: 10.1080/02673843.2004.9747936. [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)]

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^v Bozoglan B., Demirel V., Sahin I. (2013). Loneliness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction as predictors of internet addiction: A cross-sectional study among Turkish university students. *Scand. J. Psychol*. 2013;54:313–319. doi: 10.1111/sjop.12049.

^{vi} . Bian M., Leung L. (2015). Linking loneliness, shyness, smartphone addiction symptoms, and patterns of smartphone use to social capital. *Soc. Sci. Comput. Rev*. 33:61–79. doi: 10.1177/0894439314528779.

^{vii} 26. İlhan T. (2012). Loneliness among university students: Predictive power of sex roles and attachment styles on loneliness. *Educ. Sci*. 2012;12:2387–2396.

^{viii} McIntyre J.C., Worsley J., Corcoran R., Harrison Woods P., Bentall R.P. (2018). Academic and non-academic predictors of student psychological distress: The role of social identity and loneliness. *J. Ment. Health*. 27:230–239. doi: 10.1080/09638237.2018.1437608.

^{ix} 28. Stoliker B.E., Lafreniere K.D. (2015). The influence of perceived stress, loneliness, and learning burnout on university students’ educational experience. *Coll. Stud. J*. 49:146–160. [[Google Scholar](#)]

- ^x : Jason C. McIntyre, Joanne Worsley, Rhiannon Corcoran, Paula Harrison Woods & Richard P. Bentall (2018). Academic and non-academic predictors of student psychological distress: the role of social identity and
^{xixixi} <https://universitybusiness.co.uk/news/quarter-of-students-feel-lonely-unite-survey-suggests/>
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^{xxxivxxxivxxxiv} <https://universitybusiness.co.uk/news/quarter-of-students-feel-lonely-unite-survey-suggests/>