Loneliness and Social Isolation during COVID-19: Queen Margaret University Students' Experiences

Queen Margaret University EDINBURGH

Enhancement Themes

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Aim:

To better understand the experiences of social isolation and loneliness amongst students at Queen Margaret University during 2020/21.

Background:

- This study was conducted under the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Enhancement Theme 'Resilient Learning Communities'.

- Loneliness has been found to affect students' academic and social adjustment[1,2] and it has been suggested loneliness is correlated with the increasing prevalence rates of mental illness and decreased levels of wellbeing amongst students in the UK.[3, 4]

- The experience of loneliness has variations depending on demographics (e.g., level of study, subject of study, gender, age).[5, 6]

- Feelings of loneliness increased drastically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.[7]

Methodology:

Using a psychosocial study approach and a convergent mixed-methods approach[8], the data were generated between February-October 2021 through:

- 1 student questionnaire (296 responses)
- 1 staff questionnaire (92 responses),
- 2 online student focus groups (12 participants)

The qualitative data (focus groups and questionnaire comments) were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using inferential statistics.

Loneliness & social isolation during COVID

Student Groups

International Students
Returning home or remaining in Scotland without certainty of when they can return; regression to a former version of self; forming and losing a second family; lack and loss of control while 'at home' or 'abroad'.

Direct Entrant Students
Entering an already established cohort; uncertain of where to turn, or to whom.

Students Struggling with Mental Health Pre-Pandemic
Experiences of loneliness & social isolation predating COVID significantly predicted the extent of such feelings during the pandemic; mental health got worse; however, also a sense of security that 'things would get better'.

Shielding Students
Impact on mental health and professional identity when removed from workplace after labelled 'highly vulnerable'; isolating from family; constant worry of catching virus; missing out on limited on-campus interaction.

Level 1 Students
Students in L1 marginally lonelier compared to those in L2, significantly less lonely than L3 & 4, yet significantly more socially isolated than students in L2 & 3.

Community

Difficult to Build Relationships Online
"From my perspective I think there is no real camaraderie or social cohesion within my 1st year cohort. It was beginning to develop and then when we went 100% online it vanished. I have felt extremely isolated and detached from university I have no contact at all with anyone else on my course" (Student - Q)

Informal Interaction
Lack of social micro- and informal interactions student-student and student-staff in both academic, public and liminal spaces.

Academic Isolation
"Peers are academically isolated, cannot talk as effectively with other students about university workloads and gain support through people who are experiencing the same things as you are" (Student - Q)

Resilience

Coping with Loneliness & Social Isolation
Coping mechanisms broadly involved either 'keeping busy' (physically, intellectually, socially) and/or 'distractions'; separation between 'good' vs. 'bad' coping; reliance on Personal Academic Tutors and other academic staff; hope.

Next Enhancement Theme phase to focus on:

- Strategies to develop a sense of community
- Understand what community means amongst students.
- Support Personal Academic Tutors to support their students.

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[4] Thorley, C. (2017). Not by degree: Improving student mental health in the UK's universities. The Institute for Public Policy Research
[5] Hysing, M., Petrie, K. J., Bøe, T., Lønning, K. J., & Sivertsen, B. (2020). Only the lonely: A study of loneliness among university students in Norway. Clinical Psychology in Europe, 2(1).
[6] Gillard, S., et al. (2021). Experiences of living with mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK: a coproduced, participatory qualitative interview study. Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 56(8), 1447–1457.
[7] Scottish Government (2020). Scottish Health Survey - telephone survey - August/September 2020. Main report. Chapter 3: Social capital and loneliness
[8] Creswell, J. W., & Tashakkori, A. (2007). Editorial: Differing Perspectives on Mixed Methods Research. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 1(4), 303–308.