

Lonely Learning & Learning to be Lonely:

A Study of Student Resilience and Challenge during the COVID-19 Lockdown

Executive summary

There is evidence of loneliness amongst students pre-dating the pandemic which has variations depending on demographics (e.g. level of study, subject of study, gender, age) and recent studies have shown that such experiences increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducted under the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Enhancement Theme 'Resilient Learning Communities', the aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of social isolation and loneliness amongst students at Queen Margaret University during 2020/21. A psychosocial approach was used with a mixed-methods research design. Data was generated though questionnaires and online focus groups.

Quantitative findings indicate

- Students' feelings of social isolation during COVID-19 were significantly predicted by the extent of social isolation felt before the onset of the pandemic, as well as loneliness experienced in the past week. Similarly, loneliness during COVID-19 was significantly predicted by levels of loneliness experienced prior to the pandemic, as well as social isolation experienced in the past week.
- The COVID-19 lockdown phase had a notable effect on feelings of loneliness and social isolation.
- Students living on QMU campus felt less socially isolated but lonelier than those living at home with a partner, parents or guardians. However, there was no notable difference between students living on QMU campus compared to off-campus shared accommodation with others, or on their own.
- Students in level 1 are marginally lonelier than students in level 2, whilst significantly less lonely than those in level 3 and 4. Students in level 1 are significantly more socially isolated than those in level 2 and 3, but not level 4.

Qualitative findings indicate

- Students' experiences of loneliness and social isolation were predominately based in a lack of connection to their peers and a lack of a sense of belonging to the university community.
- Underpinning these experiences were difficulties in building relationships online and missing opportunities to engage in co-constructed learning with their peers in physical spaces.
- Students coped with their feelings of loneliness and social isolation in diverse ways. Coping mechanisms broadly involved 'keeping busy' (physically, intellectually, socially) and using 'distractions'.

This study has informed the next phase of the Enhancement Theme at QMU, where we will 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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Introduction and rationale

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. Each Theme allows the sector to share and learn from current and innovative national and international practice. The current Theme, *Resilient Learning Communities* runs from July 2020 to July 2023. At Queen Margaret University (QMU) we have established an Institutional Team to identify and lead priority projects under the umbrella of the Resilient Learning Communities Theme, focusing on student experiences of loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, our key objectives were to raise awareness of the experience of loneliness and isolation; to enhance understanding of the means by which these can be managed, and, whilst we acknowledge that these experiences are not by default negative, we aim to develop resources to mitigate loneliness and isolation where they are felt to be detrimental to the individual.

Literature review

Many students experience loneliness at some point during their time at university, both in the United Kingdom and internationally. When starting university, students often relocate and are thus physically distanced from close relationships and established social networks and support systems, which can increase feelings of loneliness (Wawera & McCamley, 2020). Feelings of loneliness have been found to affect students' academic and social adjustment (Benner, 2011; Wohn & LaRose, 2014) 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 (Richardson, Elliot & Roberts, 2017; Thorley, 2017). Experiences of isolation and loneliness have also been positioned as a key reason for both undergraduate and postgraduate students withdrawal from university (Ali & Kohun, 2007).

Loneliness, according to some studies, may be experienced more intensely by young adults than other age groups, in the UK (Victor & Yang, 2012) and outwith (Demarinis, 2018; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016). In studies investigating student loneliness specifically, the focus has been "exclusively on the homogenous age group of university students" (Diehl, Jansen, Ishchanova & Hilger-Kolb, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, studies that report having a representative

student sample (Nightline Association, 2014; The Insight Network, 2019) are weighed significantly towards a large majority of participants under the age of 25. However, such a homogeneity in students ages fails to capture the diverse student body demographics at universities such as Queen Margaret University (QMU).

International perspectives on student loneliness and isolation

Numerous studies conducted outside of the UK show the prevalence of loneliness amongst students and its impact. Hysling, Petrie, Bøe, Lønning and Sivertsen (2020) conclude, in their Norway-based study, that the youngest and oldest students in their sample reported the highest levels of loneliness. Notably, their results also show a significant increase in feelings of loneliness between 2014 and 2018 (16% to 23.6%) with the number of male students reported feeling 'extremely lonely' having more than doubled (Hysling et al., 2020). They further note that loneliness rates were higher amongst females, singles and those living alone. Studies on loneliness in the general population have similarly identified that having a stable partner decreases reported experiences of loneliness (Beutel et al., 2017; Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014), as has Diehl et al. (2018) in a university context.

Diehl et al.'s (2018) study on German students show that 32.4% of their sample reported feeling 'moderately lonely' and 3.2% 'severely lonely'. They also identified a distinction between students experiencing emotional loneliness and social loneliness, with emotional loneliness being characterised by a deficiency in close relationships and social loneliness being related to a lack of overall social relationships and networks (Weiss, 1973). Both types were associated with feelings of depression and anxiety. They found that emotional loneliness was more prevalent than social loneliness (7.7% compared to 3.2%) and noted that this finding may be explained by most students in their study being well-integrated socially, leading to low reported instances of social loneliness (Diehl et al., 2018). Reports of social loneliness were positively associated with having an immigrant background (see also Rich Madsen, Damsgaard, Jervesund and Holstein, 2016), being physically inactive and studying social sciences.

The difference in programme of study is also noted by Ray, Coon and Fullerton's (2019) based in the US, where 19.4% of their sample of graduate or professional healthcare students felt socially isolated; with nursing students reporting higher rates than other healthcare students. They acknowledge that a greater percentage of nursing students had taken online course work than other students in the sample, which may have impacted the results (Ray et al., 2019). Disciplinary differences in student reports of experienced social isolation are also prominent in studies focusing on doctoral students. Social isolation is reportedly higher in the social sciences, humanities and arts, as opposed to the natural sciences and technology, since natural science and technology doctoral researchers more often are part of formal and organised research teams (Parry, Atkinson & Delamont, 1997; Deem & Brehony, 2000). It is therefore useful to explore how smaller cohorts, institutional academic, social and emotional support services affect feelings of loneliness amongst students, particularly in the context of COVID-19, where online delivery has been standard across most programmes.

The year of study of respondents also appears to affect reported levels of loneliness and isolation. Özdemir and Tuncay (2008) found that 60.2% of their student sample at a Turkish university experienced loneliness, with higher levels being reported by first-year students. Furthermore, Lui, Zhang, Yang and Yu's (2018) longitudinal study on college first-year students in China show that higher levels of social isolation and loneliness were associated with depressive symptoms in female students, but only social isolation - not loneliness - was associated with increased depressive symptoms in male students. They suggest that different interventions to help female and male college students might be needed to help them adjust to college life (Lui et al., 2018). However, experiences of isolation and loneliness are not limited to first-year undergraduate students; in Ali and Kohun's (2006) study doctoral students in the US experience social isolation at different stages of their programmes. Indeed, social isolation is stated as a key factor for high drop-out rates amongst doctoral students in numerous studies (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Janta, Lugosi & Brown, 2012). Further research is required to understand how, or if, feelings of loneliness and isolation differ across years of study, particularly during COVID-19 when most first-year students had fewer opportunities to engage with their peers either informally or in a structured setting than in other years.

National perspectives on student social isolation and loneliness

Consistent with international research, loneliness amongst university students in the UK affect both domestic and international students, studying at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (Janta et al., 2012; Vasileiou et al., 2019). Indeed, the trends in results align with those of international studies overall. In some studies, feelings of loneliness are conflated with other experiences, such as anxiety and feelings of not being able to cope (The Insight Network, 2019), which may be misleading in the accounts of actual prevalence of loneliness specifically. In most studies, both national and international, the concepts 'social isolation' and 'loneliness' are also conflated or used interchangeably. Further clarity, therefore, should be sought of students' experiences of social isolation as opposed to loneliness.

Vasileiou et al.'s (2019) UK-based study adds to the existing – and overwhelmingly consistent – body of evidence that their undergraduate participants understood their sense of loneliness to partially relate to a perceived discrepancy between their own negative feelings and that which they saw exhibited on social media and/or expressed by other people. Relatedly, their participants experienced that their sense of 'apartness' from others was deepened when they saw other people enjoying time and activities together (Vasileiou et al., 2019). This finding is of particular interest in the context of COVID-19 as opportunities to see others socially engaging with one another has been limited.

In 2019/20, 22% of the student population in the UK were international students (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). Wawera and McCamley (2020) report that 72.13% of the international students in their sample reported that they had experienced loneliness since coming to the UK. International research also indicates that loneliness is endemic amongst international students (see e.g., Okorocha, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia, 2008). Findings show that cultural differences can make it difficult for international students to build social networks, which can result in feelings of loneliness (Tsai, Wang & Wei, 2017; Wawera & McCamley, 2020). A language barrier has also been identified as a contributing factor, both for international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and non-native English speakers at English-speaking universities overall (Ray et al., 2019). It is important to consider the particular challenges of loneliness and isolation during COVID-19 to gain better insight into how support services and initiatives can be tailored for international students' needs.

Online study

Although the vast majority of research on student loneliness and isolation focuses on a faceto-face university experience, a limited number of studies focus on online delivery. Ali and Smith (2015) have studied felt levels of social isolation amongst US students enrolled in online courses compared to those enrolled in face-to-face courses. They found that withdrawal rates were higher for online than face-to-face courses (see also Parkhurst, Moskal & Downey, 2008; Schaeffer & Konetes, 2010) and that higher levels of social isolation influenced students' decision to withdraw from the course (Ali & Smith, 2015). A case study by Duranton and Mason (2012) on a long-distance learning postgraduate course in the UK show that students were fearful of loneliness and of not being able to meet face-to-face. These studies focus on students who made a conscious decision to study some of their courses online. Exploring feelings of loneliness and isolation amongst students who have not made that decision is of interest – particularly in investigating differences between first-year students who entered into university knowing there was a high likelihood that their first year would be conducted online and students in later years who did not.

Coping mechanisms

Vasileiou et al. (2019) report that their UK student sample sought emotional support from family members, friends from home, partners of close friends in the new university environment – preferably face-to-face, but they resorted to alternative forms of communication (texts, phone calls) if geographically distant from those they wished to reach. At times, support was sought from mental health professionals and distant friends. Notably, whilst the participants predominately sought support from significant others, they also expressed how they often hid their feelings of loneliness from them to avoid worrying or upsetting them (Vasileiou et al., 2019). Indeed, Vasileiou et al. note how it is paradoxical that loneliness is often assumed to be caused by objective social isolation (the number of social relationships someone has), when self-induced withdrawal is a common coping mechanism to manage such feelings (see also Rokach, 1990; Rokach & Brock, 1998).

Other coping mechanisms by students have been noted and are overall consistent across studies and countries. Vaarala et al. (2013) note how coping mechanisms amongst Finnish students involve distractions such as going out or spending time on hobbies, seeking social support and focusing on self-comforting ideas – for example using optimism or thinking that difficult feelings will eventually pass (see also Janta et al., 2012; Vasileiou et al., 2019; Wawera & McCamley, 2020). Vasileiou et al. (2019) further explain how some students had visited home to ease their feelings of loneliness, whereas for others merely knowing that visiting home was a possibility for them helped them manage feelings of loneliness. For students living away from home during COVID-19, opportunities to visit home have been limited and risky in ways not previously taken into consideration in the context of student isolation and loneliness.

Resilience

Resilience is a contested, multi-layered term widely used across both the natural and social sciences (Reid and Botterill, 2013). The term is broadly used to refer to the acquired ability to adapt to, and 'bounce back' from, adverse or traumatic situations (Higgins, 1994; Kaye-Kauderer et al., 2021) or to how an individual practically copes with such situations (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013). Under this umbrella, resilience research has addressed the concept on an individual level as a relatively stable personality trait (Hu et al., 2015); as an individual's ability to put coping strategies into practice to overcome challenge (Bonanno, 2004); and as a type of resistance to potential psychological trauma and an internal drive to heal (Serrando Sarmiento et al., 2021). Other research has moved beyond looking at the individual characteristics that facilitate resilience to examine the interaction between the individual and their contexts, in a personal, community and cultural/societal sense (Ungar, 2011; Kaye-Kauderer et al., 2021). Furthermore, critical resilience research has emphasised how resilience or 'being able to cope' ought not to be framed as the responsibility of an individual alone, but that resilience as a capacity is constrained or made possible through their interdependent relationship with larger systems through which an individual can prepare and adapt to adverse situations to both cope with that situation and to promote their wellbeing (Ungar, 2011).

Moreover, student resilience is commonly spoken about in terms of a student's ability to successfully overcome adversities or significant stressors that can influence their educational development (Martin, 2013). Recent studies of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic have approached the topic from institutional (Giovanni et al., 2020; Nandy et al., 2020), staff (Bartusevičienė et al., 2021) and student (Drach-Zahavy et al., 2021) perspectives. Considering the student perspective in particular, Ang et al.'s (2021) study of online learning during the pandemic concludes that personal, relational, environmental and cultural elements played into student resilience, as consistent with previous literature on resilience-enhancing strategies (Sanderson & Brewer, 2017; Farquhar et al., 2018).

International perspectives on student loneliness and isolation during COVID-19

As with pre-pandemic research, during COVID-19 there is a clear correlation between loneliness and a deterioration in mental health outcomes (Werner et al., 2021). Exploring loneliness and social isolation in many countries, through the timeline of when research was conducted, highlights an emerging pattern. During the onset of social distancing measures hope remained high that 'normality' would resume promptly, thus even when social isolation was experienced, loneliness was not as significant a risk factor as other immediate Coronavirus related concerns, such as health and/or financial safety. Okruszek et al. (2020) recruited across two waves during the onset of COVID-19 lockdown, on 15th of March 2020, 3 days after the initial national Polish lockdown, then again on March 29th. Most respondents were students (77%), living with others (6% reported living alone) in a large city (74%). Loneliness was correlated with a decrease in mental health, less affective response and decreased risk perception related to COVID-19 health behaviours. However, loneliness did not significantly worsen between these two dates. At this time, hope was still high due to an envisioned brief lockdown period; during wave 1, the 74 participants predicted a median lockdown length of only 31 days. Moreover, 86% of participants reported they were not in a group particularly affected by COVID-19, indicating more concern for someone they knew who did have vulnerability to the virus.

Shortly after, Elmer et al. (2020) compared self-report measures in university students in Switzerland. Surveys were initially completed in September 2019 then again in April 2020, a fortnight after lockdown commenced. Findings suggest all mental health indicators worsened, including loneliness, with a shift from worrying more about social life in September 2019, to health/safety of loved ones in April 2020. Elmer et al. (2020) found both objective social isolation and subjective isolation from emotional support, interaction and social networks were related to a decline in mental health. Moreover, students reported feeling significantly lonelier during COVID-19 lockdown, with female students especially impacted, a finding corroborated in further studies (Labrague et al., 2021). Although friendship support networks remained stable between the two measures, 'functional social networks', alike the QMU Peer Assisted Learning Scheme, decreased in extent and frequency. Students reported a significant reduction in access to study partners, with 39% having no co-study companion compared to 22% prepandemic. Students with smaller networks experienced more loneliness, whereas those

experiencing emotional support were considerably less lonely. Hamza et al. (2021) compared psychological wellbeing in 750 University students in Canada between in May 2019 and May 2020; when Canadian universities were utilising blended, distance learning. Once controlling for gender, they found a similar pattern, that social isolation and loneliness significantly predicted heightened psychological distress during the quarantine period, compared to pre-COVID-19. Labrague and colleagues (2021) explored COVID-19 related loneliness amongst students in the Philippines, recruiting in June and July 2020. 9 in 10 students were lonely; over half of students indicated moderate loneliness and almost a fourth as severely lonely with emotional loneliness more common than social loneliness. Individuals experiencing higher levels of loneliness reported less social support, with less resilience and coping behaviours also decreasing social loneliness.

Taken together, international literature indicates that loneliness has worsened in the student population peri-pandemic compared to pre-pandemic. Moreover, as the pandemic endured, feelings of isolation and loneliness increased, exacerbating related mental health outcomes. Although many cross-cultural similarities have been found in the psychosocial reaction to COVID-19, there are also notable differences. For instance, conducted in April 2020, a trinational study found a full mediation model, where loneliness mediated the relationship between social support and hope, with perceived social support decreasing loneliness and in turn, increasing hope. However, this mediating model was only found in the UK, but not in USA and Israel (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2021). Among 1200 participants, increased social support in the USA and Israel directly predicts higher levels of hope. However, this direct effect did not occur in the UK; higher perceived social support relates to fewer feelings of loneliness, which in turn increases hope. Thus, in the UK specifically, loneliness was identified as an increased vulnerability factor.

National perspectives on student social isolation and loneliness during COVID-19

In the UK, COVID-19 social distancing restrictions commenced in March 2020 and were in place to varying degrees for over a year. Savage et al. (2020) recruited 214 students studying in the UK, comparing self-report, online survey findings completed by students before COVID-19 (November 2019 and January 2020) and again during the initial UK lockdown periods (March and April 2020). Results suggest a decline in mental health during the initial lockdown period, noting social isolation and reduced social support as contributing factors, However,

Evans et al. (2021) did not find high levels of loneliness within UK university students during the initial stages of COVID-19 lockdown, although anxiety increased and wellbeing decreased overall. Bu, Stepto and Fancourt (2020) measured loneliness in 38,000 adults living in the UK from a heterogenous sample, from 21st March 2020 (two days prior to lockdown implementation) across 7 weeks at the onset of the initial COVID-19 lockdown until May 2020. Social support was identified as a risk factor in the UK population, with individuals who perceive themselves to have a strong social support network being 89% less likely to be in the highest loneliness classification, as categorised by Bu, Stepto & Fancourt (2020). Several socio-demographic vulnerabilities were identified, with women, young people and those with diagnosed mental health at increased risk of experiencing feelings of loneliness. Importantly, in relation to the current study, students were found to be more than twice as likely to be in the highest loneliness class than non-students.

Groake et al. (2020) conducted a cross-sectional online survey on 1954 adults, with a majority being female, from March to June 2020. They found loneliness in the UK was relatively stable during this time, further suggesting a bi-directional interconnection between loneliness and depression during COVID-19, with loneliness predicting higher levels of depressive symptomology a month subsequent, and vice versa. However, this correlation was not mediated by emotional regulation, against prediction. Groake et al. (2020) suggest that young individuals and those with pre-existing mental health issues should be prioritised in accessing mental health interventions. Gillard et al. (2021) conducted 49 in-depth interviews, exploring the lived experience of those with pre-existing mental health conditions during COVID-19. Individuals felt a difficulty in feeling social belonging, as well as a perceived lack in mental health facilities overall, with a greater detriment to black and ethnic communities. Thus, students in vulnerable categories are likely to be experiencing additional adversity related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October 2020, The British Red Cross (2020) noted that 39% of those experiencing loneliness indicated feelings of inability to cope with the change to life, compared to the UK average of 12%. Then, during November/December 2020, The British Red Cross (2020) interviewed 29 adults and surveyed 2000 (500 from Scotland). Social connectedness was identified as a major challenge in the COVID-19 response, with an increased time spent alone negatively influencing mental health, as well as less quality time spent with others who are relied on for support. In both the qualitative and quantitative findings, mental health including isolation and loneliness

was deemed the largest negative impact; 71% said mental ill-health was contributing to their current state, 62% reported that this was in part due to missing family or friends and 60% highlighting a lack of social contact as a factor. Moreover, carers were most likely to indicate loneliness and isolation, as shielding meant they suffered from this daily. Negative mental health was associated with reduced hope, as the idea of a return to normality had faded, with enduring social isolation and loneliness taking affect. At this stage, a respondent noted restrictions felt "never-ending" (The British Red Cross, 2020). Several barriers were identified for those who did not seek out support related to loneliness, including feeling like a burden, thinking others may require it more, being unsure about eligibility and feeling they should be resilient without additional assistance.

In December, almost half of Scottish respondents indicated loneliness, compared to 21% prepandemic, continuing to find the younger age group most affected (Scottish Government, 2020). This was higher than in September 2020, where a Scottish Government report outlined 40% of individuals experiencing loneliness in the previous week; 27% feeling lonely some of the time and 5% almost always. As with other studies, females were more likely to feel loneliness as well as the younger age group. The Scottish Government cited loneliness as a key harm of the crisis. COVID-19 has reframed the archetype of loneliness and social isolation, demonstrating the issue as a public health concern for all individuals across the lifespan, with young people, students, females¹, ethnically and racial diverse individuals all included in the conversation, as during COVID-19 many of our students were vulnerable to adverse impacts of loneliness during the pandemic (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Using a public health approach, O'Sullivan et al. (2021) suggests social institutions, such as universities, can strengthen the sense of community and bring back positive connection. Developing interventions through understanding the lived experience will help mitigate the current and projected consequential impacts of COVID-19, both throughout and following the pandemic, improving the lives of those most affected.

Definitions

The terms loneliness and isolation are widely contested, however those we used for the purposes of this study were given in our Briefing Paper at the outset of this work, see Appendix 3.

¹ We use male/female descriptors if studies we cite have no data on other gender descriptors.

Research aims and questions

This research focussed on the experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst students at Queen Margaret University during COVID-19. Its aim was to raise awareness of the experience, but also bring attention to the strategies developed by staff, the institution and students to manage it and to develop resilience and coping strategies.

To fulfil this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

- What mechanisms and services are available to QMU students who are experiencing loneliness or social isolation?
- What is the nature of the lived experience of loneliness or social isolation amongst students?
- What are the coping behaviours, mechanisms, strategies and tools of QMU students experiencing loneliness and social isolation?

In discussion with the internal institutional Enhancement Themes (ET) team on November 9th 2020 it was agreed that the first year of the ET work should be focussed on student experiences of social isolation and loneliness to better understand and enhance practice and to highlight student resilience. This decision was taken following reports that students were increasingly describing such feelings specifically related to COVID-19. The research team undertook to differentiate between loneliness and social isolation in the study, as well as give due consideration to the needs of different groups of students, such as first year, direct entrants (students who enter directly into second, third or fourth year after completing a relevant college qualification) and international students.

Ethical considerations

The research was granted ethical approval by Queen Margaret University's Ethics Panel.

At the start of the questionnaire, the participants were provided with a participant information sheet that outlined the background and rational of the study. They were also made aware that their answers were anonymous and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. If they did not give their full consent (i.e., did not tick 'yes' in response to *all* statements), they could not

continue with the questionnaire. Once participants had completed the questionnaire they were given a summary of the study.

Given the possibility of mild psychological distress when reflecting on their experiences of loneliness and social isolation, all participants were signposted to a range of student support services in the debrief after completing the questionnaire. They were also given the contact details of the lead researcher and an academic with no association to the study to contact if they had further questions.

Methodology

Though limited, the scope of this research was ambitious. It was conducted using a convergent mixed method approach (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007) whereby quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in parallel to gain simultaneous insights into statistical associations and in-depth individual perspectives. This allowed for a broad understanding – in quantitative terms – of loneliness and social isolation across years, student groups and COVID-phase, qualitative input in the form of qualitative comments, as well as an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences of loneliness and social isolation in focus groups. This latter data can be difficult to obtain through questionnaires alone. Qualitative thematic analyses of focus group narrative probed individual experiences of social isolation and loneliness.

To consider differences in staff and student perceptions and understandings of loneliness and social isolation a staff questionnaire was similarly issued, but, due to restricted resources and the enhancement aim, the research team and broader Enhancement Theme team elected to focus attention on the data from students.

Student questionnaire

The research team issued a student questionnaire on Qualtrics in February 2021 which remained open until June 2021. The questionnaire was designed by the research team and amendments were made following scrutiny by the Enhancement Theme team before the questionnaire was made live.

The period in which the questionnaire was live saw a number of changes in Scotland's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the questionnaire was launched, strict lockdown restrictions were in place, which started to ease in most parts of Scotland in mid-April. Restrictions were eased further in May (with the exception of Glasgow), with easing restrictions on hospitality, entertainment, education and sport. The period also saw the start of the vaccination roll-out. This had reached two thirds of the eligible population mid-May and was extended to international students mid-June. At the end of June, just before the questionnaire closed, it was announced that the whole of Scotland was likely to move into Level 0 in mid-July. Acknowledging the time period that the questionnaire was active is relevant, as the restrictions and phase may have influenced student responses.

The questionnaire was made up of four parts. In Part 1, participants were asked to provide personal and demographic information related to age, gender identity, sex assigned at birth, sexual orientation, living situation, student status, course details (course title and year), alternative access routes to university (carer, foster, college graduate), country of origin and ethnicity. In Part 2, participants were asked to indicate which QMU and/or wellbeing services they had, so far, accessed during COVID-19 and how effective they found these to be (if accessed). In Part 3, participants were provided with definitions of social isolation and loneliness and were asked to indicate how often, if at all, they had experienced these feelings (on a yearly and weekly basis and if this had changed in the year of COVID-19). They were also asked how they had managed such feelings (if experienced). Lastly, they were asked to indicate the perceived level of support they received from their support network(s). In Part 4, participants were asked to share their observations about social isolation and loneliness amongst their peers, if/how it had changed in the past year and how they and their peers spoke about the two states. They were also asked if they wanted to share any additional comments and observations and provide suggestions for future improvement related to loneliness and isolation support at QMU. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate if they would agree to being contacted for the next phase of the study - student focus groups. If they did they were asked to provide an email address.

A total of 296 participants completed the questionnaire. However, when analysing the data the research team decided to only include responses from participants who had completed 60% or more of the questions totalling 238 responses.

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited through online learning platform (Blackboard) announcements, over email, the university student news bulletin (Moderator) and through several social media accounts on various platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) that are attached to the university, including the official Queen Margaret University and Student Union pages. The only recruitment criteria were that the participant was over the age of 18 and a current student at the university.

A breakdown of the student participant demographics for the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

Student focus groups

Researchers conducted four focus groups with a total number of 12 participants in July 2021, shortly after Scotland had moved into Level 0. The focus groups were conducted over MS Teams in in accordance with government and university guidelines and for convenience of the student participants. The length of the focus groups ranged from approximately 1. 5 hours to 2.5 hours. Discussions were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were used for all participants. The aim of the groups was to encourage more in-depth narrative from students about their experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown.

A semi-structured approach was used with a set of questions as a guide for conversation that allowed for flexibility. The participants were asked to reflect on and discuss questions that expanded on those asked in the questionnaire, predominately regarding their experiences of social isolation and loneliness and their ways of coping with these. Before the start of the focus group, the researchers shared their thoughts and experiences of the past year and on their own role(s) at the university to start off the conversation, as well as to explain why they were conducting the study.

Researchers contacted all participants who had indicated an interest in taking part in a followup focus group in their response to the questionnaire. In total, approximately 110 participants were contacted. Just over 10% of participants responded to the call for focus group participants, totalling 12. The small number of participants, between 3 and 5 in each focus group, allowed for in-depth conversations that would not have been possible with bigger groups as this gave all participants the chance to speak about their experiences, reflect on the questions they were asked as well as pursue alternative lines of conversation.

Focus group participants came from both of the university's two Schools – The School of Arts, Social Sciences and Management and The School of Health Sciences – and were studying a range of programmes. The participants' level of study ranged from first year undergraduate to first year PhD. Some of the focus group participants also fall under distinctive groups, notably: Direct Entrant students, mature students and international students.

Staff questionnaire

The staff questionnaire, also hosted on Qualtrics, was issued in June 2021 and was open until October 2021. Like the student questionnaire, the questionnaire was designed by the research team and again amendments were made following suggestions from the Enhancement Theme team before the it was made live.

Notably, the aim of the staff questionnaire was not to investigate the university staff's personal experiences of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19 as this was being explored in other areas of QMU. Rather, the questionnaire was issued to understand how the staff perceived students' experiences as well as how they had supported their students.

The staff questionnaire comprised three parts. In Part 1 participants were asked to provide demographic data as well as a description of their role at the university, how long they had worked at QMU and the nature of their contract. In Part 2, they were asked to indicate to which support services they had directed students in the past year, how else they had supported students emotionally (if at all), and the amount of time per week they spent supporting students on average. They were also asked to reflect on how prepared they felt to do so, and how they had coped with providing the level of emotional support needed. In Part 3, participants were given definitions of social isolation and loneliness and were asked to share their reflections of such experiences amongst students in the COVID-19 year. They were also invited to share examples of practice that enable students to build social connections and/or learning communities with other students. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate if they were

willing to be contacted for further details about these practices. If yes, they were asked to provide an email address.

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited by email sent out by members of the research team, the Enhancement Theme team and the university staff news bulletin (Moderator). The recruitment criteria were that the participant was over the age of 18 and that they had worked at the university during COVID-19.

A total of 92 participants completed the questionnaire, with 70 analysed. A breakdown of the participant demographics for the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2.

Data analysis

Qualitative

Focus group data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. After the focus group discussions had been transcribed verbatim, the research team read through each transcript individually, making note of common themes in the different accounts. They then analysed the transcripts and their notes together, discussing differences and similarities and agreed on a number of key themes and subthemes.

The qualitative comments in the student questionnaire were organised into the themes as appropriate, and accounts of experiences that had not come up in the focus groups were considered and placed into separate subthemes. The comments and focus group extracts were then included in one table and analysed together.

Quantitative

Quantitative data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Loneliness and social isolation in the past week/year are measured on a 4-point Likert scale. Date of questionnaire completion was transformed into three lockdown phases, based on key milestones announced by The Scottish Government; Phase 1 (underway when questionnaire launched on 14th April)-six adults from separate households can meet outdoors for socialising, recreation & exercise; Phase 2 (from 20th April 2021)- move to level 3 nationwide, with hospitality venues and tourist

sites re-opening; Phase 3 (from May 14th)- Scotland, excluding Glasgow, move to level 2 with restrictions in hospitality, entertainment, education and sport relaxing.

Data clean-up identified two outliers and a single associate student, who were removed from further analyses. Subsequently, inspecting normality tests, scatterplots, histograms and boxplots of loneliness and social isolation in the past week, year, and pre-Covid-19 were deemed adequate to continue to inferential statistics.

Results

Overall, quantitative findings suggest pre-exposure to loneliness and social isolation prior to COVID-19 can predict the likelihood of feeling greater loneliness and isolation during the pandemic; this may offer insights related to the state or trait debate within loneliness literature. Moreover, as well as individual psychological factors, environmental situation (particularly living status) can also impact upon students.

Students in level one are marginally lonelier compared to students in level two, significantly less lonely than three and four, yet significantly more socially isolated than those in year two and three. Although students staying in QMU halls are considerably less socially isolated than those living at home with parents or a partner, they feel significantly lonelier. This suggests it is not the number of people surrounding students that is an important factor, but rather the quality (or lack of) within the university community.

Full results are detailed below.

Inferential statistics

Pearson's Correlations indicate a significantly strong relationship between loneliness and social isolation, indicating scope for inferential statistics to be performed (Table 2). Moreover, for all statistical analyses, acceptable sample sizes were used (Delice, 2010), assumptions were met, with no multicollinearity problems or independent error (Yu et al., 2015), and normality assumed (Stoltzfus, 2011). Next, two multiple regression analyses determined if social isolation/loneliness in the past week were predicted by loneliness/social isolation experienced pre-covid-19 and in past week. Then, an ANCOVA, analysed environmental factors such as student living status [QMU Campus, Off-campus shared accommodation with others, at home

with parents of guardians, at home with a partner, on my own], university year [level 1, level 2, level 3, level 4] and COVID Phase [phase 1, phase 2, phase 3] on loneliness and social isolation felt in the past week.

TABLE 5. Tearson's Correla	1	2	3	1	5
1. Pre-Covid Loneliness	1.	2.	5.	4.	5.
2. Loneliness in past year	.404**				
3. Loneliness in past week	.329**	.659**			
4. Pre-Covid Social Isolation	.450**	.190**	.166*		
5. Social isolation in past year	.273**	.583**	.406**	.189**	
6. Social isolation in past week	.166*	.417**	.572**	.166*	.595**

Note. *= Significant at <.05, **= Significant at <.01 (2 tailed)

Social isolation felt in the past week

A multiple linear regression was conducted to determine predictors on social isolation felt in the past week. Pre-COVID-19 loneliness, pre-COVID-19 social isolation and loneliness in past week were entered, revealing a model which was statistically significant (F(3, 197) = 33.218, p < .001, R2 = 33%). Participants predicted social isolation in the past week is equal to .960 -.102 (Pre-COVID-19 Loneliness) + .147 (Pre-COVID-19 Social Isolation + .571 (loneliness past week) when coded in frequency scores. Pre-COVID-19 loneliness did not significantly predict social isolation in the past week. However, pre-COVID-19 social isolation (Standardised β = .14, p= .037, VIF= 1.25) and loneliness in the past week significant predicted social isolation felt in the past week (Standardised β = .57 p <.001, VIF= 1.13).

Loneliness felt in the past week

A second multiple linear regression was conducted to determine predictive factors on loneliness felt in the past week, with Pre-COVID-19 loneliness, pre-COVID-19 social isolation and social isolation felt in past week included as variables. The model was statistically significant (F(3, 197) = 40.22, p< .001, R2 = 37%); Participants predicted social isolation in the past week is equal to .386 - .283 (Pre-COVID-19 Loneliness) - .035 (Pre-COVID-19 Social Isolation) + .536 (social isolation felt in past week), when coded in frequency scores. Pre-COVID-19 loneliness (Standardised β = .26, p< .001, VIF= 1.25) and social isolation felt in the past week (Standardised β = .54, p< .001, VIF= 1.05) were both significant predictors, whereas pre-covid social isolation did not significantly predict social isolation felt among students in the past week.

COVID phase effect on loneliness and social isolation

Through a univariate ANCOVA, the effect of COVID phase on loneliness felt in the past week was examined, whilst controlling for covariates comprised of pre-COVID-19 loneliness, pre-COVID-19 social isolation and social isolation felt in the past week. Covid phase was not significant but had notable effect on loneliness in the past week (F(2,197) = 2.62 p = .07), whereas pre-COVID-19 social isolation was not significant and had no notable effect. (F(1,197) = 3.21, p = .60). Pre-COVID-19 loneliness (F(1,197) = 19.66, p < .001) and social isolation in the past week (F(1,5) = 88.04, p < .001) remained significant, alike the regression analyses.

Similarly, a univariate ANCOVA was conducted to examine COVID phase social isolation felt in the past week, while accounting for pre-COVID-19 loneliness, pre-COVID-19 social isolation and loneliness felt in the past week. Covid phase (F(2,5) = 2.63 p = .07) had a notable effect, whereas pre-COVID-19 loneliness (F(1,5) = 2.69, p = .10) was not significantly related to social isolation in the past week. However, pre-COVID-19 social isolation (F(1,197) = 4.09, p = .044) and loneliness in the past week (F(1,5) = 88.04, p < .001) did have a significant effect.

Student year and living status on loneliness and social isolation

Next, student situation was explored through a univariate ANCOVA; examining the effects of living status and year on loneliness felt in the past week, while accounting for pre-COVID-19 loneliness, pre-COVID-19 social isolation and social isolation felt in the past week. Pre-COVID-19 social isolation (F(1,129) = 0.09, p = .76) was not significant, whereas Pre-COVID-19 loneliness was significant (F(1,129) = 6.82, p = .01) on loneliness in the past week. Moreover, social isolation in the past week (F(1,129) = 63.32, p < .001), year (F(1,129) = 2.77, p = .045) and living status (F(1,129) = 4.50, p = .002) all had significant effect, with no interaction between the latter two.

	1.	2.		3.		4.
On QMU Campus						
Off Campus Shared	M= .41					
Accommodation with others	S.E= .27					
Accommodution with others	Sig= 1.0					
At home with perents or	M= .82		M= .41			
At nome with parents of	S.E= .25		S.E= .23			
guardians	Sig= .015		Sig= .74			
	M= .83		M= .42		M=.01	
At home with a partner	S.E= .27		S.E= .24		S.E= .21	
	Sig= .026		Sig= .89		Sig= 1.0	
	M=17		M=57		M=96	M=99
On my own	S.E=.36		S.E= .35		S.E= .33	S.E= .34
	Sig= 1.0		Sig= 1.0		Sig= .031	Sig= .045

TABLE 4. ANCOVA Post-Hoc Bonferroni Correction for student living status on loneliness.

Note. Sig. adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni, M= Mean, S.E= Standard Error, Sig= Significance.

Another univariate ANCOVA examined the effects of living status and year on social isolation felt in the past week, while accounting for pre-COVID-19 loneliness, pre-COVID-19 social isolation and loneliness felt in the past week. Pre-COVID-19 loneliness (F(1,21) = .25, p = .62) and pre-COVID-19 social isolation (F(1,21) = 1.270, p = .26) did not have a significant on social isolation in the past week. However, loneliness felt in the past week (F(1,21) = 63.32, p <.001), year (F(1,21) = 4.55, p =.005) and living status (F(1,21) = 3.04, p = .02) did have significant independent effects, but no significant main interaction between year and living status.

	1.	2.	3.	4.
On QMU Campus				
Off Campus Shared	M=51 S.E= .29			
Accommodation with others	Sig= .78			
At home with parents of	M=79	M=286		
quardians	S.E= .27	S.E= .24		
Suuraiuns	Sig= .03	Sig= 1.0		
	M=83	M=32	M=03	
At home with a partner	S.E= .28	S.E= .26	S.E= .22	
	Sig= .04	Sig= 1.0	Sig= 1.0	
	M=07	M = .44	M=73	M= .76
On my own	S.E= .38	S.E= .37	S.E= .35	S.E= .36
	Sig= 1.0	Sig= 1.0	Sig= .39	Sig= .39

TABLE 5. ANCOVA Post-Hoc Bonferroni Correction for student living status on social isolation

Note. Sig. adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni, M= Mean, S.E= Standard Error, Sig= Significance.

Overall, these findings suggest pre-exposure to loneliness and social isolation prior to COVID-19 can predict the likelihood of feeling greater loneliness and isolation during the pandemic; this may offer insights related to the state or trait debate within loneliness literature. Moreover, as well as individual psychological factors, environmental situation also impacts upon students.

TABLE 4. ANCOVA Post-Hoc Bonferron	Correction for student	year on loneliness.
---	------------------------	---------------------

	1.	2.	3.
1. Level 1			
2. Level 2	M=.70		
	S.E= .26		
	Sig= 0.54		
	M=64	M= .06	
3. Level 3	S.E= .22	S.E= .25	
	Sig= .027	Sig= 1.0	
 2. Level 2 3. Level 3 	S.E= .26 Sig= 0.54 M=64 S.E= .22 Sig= .027	M= .06 S.E= .25 Sig= 1.0	

	M=66	M= .05	M= .02
4. Level 4	S.E= .24	S.E= .27	S.E= .23
	Sig= .045	Sig= 1.0	Sig= 1.0

Note. Sig. adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni, M= Mean, S.E= Standard Error, Sig= Significance.

Students in level one are marginally more lonely compared to students in level two but significantly less lonely than three and four. However, they are significantly more socially isolated than those in year two and three. Moreover, although students staying in QMU halls are considerably less socially isolated than those living at home with parents or a partner, they feel significantly lonelier. This indicates it is not the number of people surrounding students that is an important factor, but rather the quality (or lack of) within the university community.

	1. Level 1	2. Level 2	3. Level 3
1. Level 1			
	M= .91		
2. Level 2	S.E= .27		
	Sig= .006		
	M= .70	M=21	
3. Level 3	S.E= .23	S.E= .26	
	Sig= .017	Sig= 1.0	
4. Level 4	M= .44	M= -47	M=26
	S.E= .26	S.E= .28	S.E= .240
	Sig= .525	Sig= .574	Sig= 1.0

TABLE 6. Bonferroni Correction for student year on social isolation

Note. Sig. adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni, M= Mean, S.E= Standard

Awareness and use of the university's student support services

Low awareness of a number of university student support service emerged. These included Studiosity, Togetherall, support for estranged students and support for care leavers and armed forces and their families. Lecturer / tutor and Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) support emerged

as the most used forms of support at 68% and 65% respectively. See Appendix 4 for a full break down of services, levels of awareness and usage.

COVID-19 impact on the student experience: Qualitative data

Experiential and observational accounts of students and staff as captured in the qualitative data showed that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the physical distancing that came with it, shaped the student experience across programmes and years. Throughout the narrative data it was demonstrated how loneliness and social isolation have, for many, made the student journey far more challenging. It is worth pointing out that the student body at QMU is varied with cohorts of DE and International students; students who are care-experienced; differently abled; from a range of Black and Ethnic backgrounds and many shoulder a range of caring and work commitments and life responsibilities. Although our sample did not include representation from all these groups, these factors should be taken into account when considering the themes that emerged and how they should be taken forward into development work at QMU.

The three themes to emerge from the thematic analysis of the focus group *and* questionnaire qualitative data were:

- Uni community
- Lonely learning
- Co-constructive learning

We now turn to each of these.

Uni community (CommUNIty)

Students expressed not feeling part of the university community in a spatial and physical sense during the pandemic, for example by not being able to visit the library or student union. These experiences were backed up by staff observations which described how many students grasped every possible opportunity they had to come on to campus for sessions during the pandemic and showed willingness to follow all the rules for that to continue: "The thing I missed, most was the library ... it's that focus point where you can meet people and even if you don't really know them, you can connect with other people and have that solidarity, that we are all there, and we struggle on our own terms. And even that I mean most of the people I connect from the university, I connect them through the library. And I think that I really missed most – symbolically" (Diana – Focus group)

"Something I never expected was their longing for more time with lecturers and fellow students, even in difficult circumstances or in socially distanced situations. They were willing to wear masks in class and stick to the rules in order to see one another, and me. They were so keen to come to campus" (Staff - Questionnaire)

Overall, students described a sense of disconnection to the university, as well as to other students. They emphasised a lack of camaraderie, of not feeling part of a group, the anonymity of large (and interdisciplinary) groups, of online learning and, more broadly, a lack of shared experiences that are more easily facilitated and nurtured in a shared physical environment. In turn, several students noted that this disconnection had generated feelings of detachment, isolation and loneliness:

"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 - Questionnaire)

"I did expect to not be able to make too many friends, but that kind of feeling of being quite anonymous and people trying to be quite anonymous by not really having their cameras on and like not really participating ... I thought that people would still kind of try and make an effort to kind of build a group and build relationships. And for me as a class rep it was really hard to get to people and help them in a way, because a lot of people complained but never really asked for my help or asked for teachers' help. They just kind of isolated themselves in learning" (Steffi – Focus group)

Despite the overall description of the year being one of disconnection, several students explained how they had appreciated their tutors' attempts to build community within their (virtual) classrooms and spaces:

"I love what our lecturers have done [...] they had groups set up in the first semester that were really small groups and we had certain tasks that we had to do. So yes, it was still online meetings, but you still got to know other people that weren't kind of, you know, just your study group so we couldn't choose the groups they were just made for us. And I think that was quite good. And then in the second semester they asked us all what we thought, and they changed the groups so that again we would have, you know, a new set of people that we would see" (Hannah – Focus group)

Some staff members also highlighted the difficulties that came with trying to generate a sense of community and belonging. Some had made attempts to engage students through online social events but found that many were hesitant to engage. It was felt that a sense of community cannot be forced, but that student willingness is necessary for it to emerge:

"Many students have felt this [loneliness] as a result of online delivery. They have not been able to connect physically with their cohort, they find the idea on online learning daunting and seem to withdraw (by not turning cameras on, leaving breakout rooms or not engaging in any way during class). This has particularly been the case with first year students" (Staff - Questionnaire)

Lonely learning

Student accounts further indicated that students start university with expectations of building relationships, friendships and meeting new people. For some this was very important, and these students found the disconnection particularly difficult and explained that it had resulted in feelings of loneliness and social isolation:

"I was looking forward to kind of all this sort of an interactive, vibrant aspect of and social aspect to guess off of being at university again. And, you know, doing that from my kitchen or my spare room, it's not really at all the same. You know you're sure you're all the same that you've been living in a box for the past kind of year and, and almost a half, I guess. And that's a huge challenge, because, yeah, you're just not getting that physical, social side of university that is such an important part of it" (Jodie – Focus group)

"I've found this year really hard in terms of the social isolation distance like I really hoped that coming to university was going to be like me meeting people, meeting people with similar interests with me really hoped it would be something to sort of propel a bunch of friendships. And that hasn't been the case and... yeah, I definitely struggled with that a lot" (Georgia – Focus group)

There was an acknowledgement amongst both staff and students that some student groups appeared to have struggled, or that members of these groups shared that they had personally done so, more than others. In particular, Direct Entrant (DE) students were seen as particularly affected, along with students in Level 1 (or year 1) and 4:

"I [a DE student] was definitely isolated to start off with and the people in the group all knew each other. You know, when you went when we first started and I still had some of the blended classes and you walked into a classroom and they came in in groups and I'll sit by myself" (Sarah – Focus group)

"It was different depending on the Level the students were at. For Level 1, they missed out on the chance to meet people on their course, and this was exacerbated by bubbles in Halls. It was being stuck in the flat bubble that was the issues for one of my students, so much so that they had to be moved. In other years (2 and 3) the friendships were more established, so the level of support was better. Students were able to establish networks with their peers to share information - this was virtually impossible for Level 1, without QMU intervention. In Level 4, the anxiety was highest, as you would expect at Honours level, and while friendships and support were established, moving it online (and constant) seemed to amplify the anxiety" (Staff - Questionnaire)

It was noted that students who may have relied on interacting with others to build connections in a physical classroom may have particularly struggled when classes moved online. Furthermore, students who had opted for online-only engagement for various reasons expressed that they felt outside the perceived relationships amongst those who attended some on-campus classes, making them feel anxious, overwhelmed and lonely:

"For those who were already quiet and perhaps on the outskirts of the group, it has been really hard. They often relied on on-campus classes for their social connections and so struggled to be in touch with others outside of that" (Staff - Questionnaire)

"I felt that a lot of friendships were being made between those that could attend class, which made me feel even more isolated as I felt I was missing out on opportunities to make those bonds, friendships and ultimately someone to discuss the course with ... Because I feel that all the members of the physical class all know each other really well, it makes me feel intimidated to go to that class when I am able to. Last week, I travelled from Glasgow to Musselburgh for a class, and I got so anxious before the class that I didn't go because it seemed a bit overwhelming - I sat in the cafe and did a few hours of work and then left. It sounds ridiculous, I'm usually quite confident socially, but the build up in my head of everyone having connections and me not having been at any of those physical classes just seemed too much for me" (Student - Questionnaire) "It was very hard when you don't have personal relationships as well to sort of feel a confidence, even speaking in like online seminars and that ... 'cause in person you get all these like you know you get a little encouraging smile or you get you know... once you're in a space with like 30 people, all these wee boxes become so small I can't see if someone is nodding their head" (Georgia – Focus group)

However, some students also felt that they used their social isolation – and lack of connection to others – as an opportunity to focus more on their university work, achieving better marks as a result. Overall, using studies as a distraction was a common coping strategy for students in the questionnaire and within the focus groups.

Co-constructed learning

Overwhelmingly, students expressed that they missed informal social interaction with their peers, particularly before and after classes. Their accounts and experiences can be broadly perceived as missing opportunities for co-constructed learning, understood as "an interactive group knowledge building process in which learners actively construct knowledge by formulating ideas into words that are shared with and built on through the reactions and responses of others" (Stacey, 1999, p. 4). Rather than merely build connections and feel part of the university community as discussed above, they also emphasised how the lack of such interactions had an impact on their learning. For example, they described missing sharing their feelings of confusion or worry about the material, in that sense being 'confused together':

"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 - Questionnaire)

"One thing I found really quite hard was not being able to have like authentic chats with people afterwards about how those seminar went or what you thought of the lecture material, so I've only really had to go on... my own sort of thoughts, and sometimes you just need that person to bounce back at you and like give you an alternative view on something for you to actually, you know, question what you've learned and whether it's like that for you" (Emma – Focus groups)

Relatedly, students noted how they lacked alternative perspectives and other people's points of views of the module content. Some described how before the pandemic they used to meet up

in the student union or in the library to discuss what had been covered and how this had no longer been possible due to COVID:

"I tend to, especially when I'm getting sort of concepts for my head, I find it easier when there's other people around and we can sort of... put it back together again and put in different opinions [...] even just, you know, going into Maggie's, a group of people [...] using these new concepts that that that we've found, just you know, having an absolute giggle about how ridiculous some things we thought were, so that definitely sort of it compounded the social isolation" (Beth – Focus group)

"As a doctoral researcher, it's really important to bounce ideas and struggles around/ideally on a daily basis, this has not been possible and I feel has really impacted my mental health and work quality and ethic (as a result of isolation). This feeling has been echoed by my peers" (Student - Questionnaire)

Although staff do not explicitly discuss the impact that lack of social interaction has had on students' 'shared learning' they did state that they had recommended students get involved with the Peer Assisted Learning Scheme or that they have their own programme-specific 'buddy schemes' that provide opportunities for students to learn with, and from, one another.

Resilience

Finally, although not a theme in of itself, it was clear from our findings that student resilience, fortitude and general ability to devise autonomous strategies and mechanisms for coping was notable. Lacking in much of the literature which is largely given to a deficit discourse of loneliness in the student body, many studies are framed to explore what is posited as a problem (loneliness) and in so doing overlook, or under-report how the experiences of loneliness and isolation often act as triggers for agency, creativity and resource-seeking. We found ample examples of these.

When discussing how they coped (or did not cope) with feelings of loneliness and/or social isolation during the pandemic, an underlying theme that permeated the students' accounts is that of 'connection'. Some students made conscious attempts at seeking out connection, be that connection with other people or simply connection with 'something' (e.g., nature) and others expressed that their lack of connection made them retreat and isolate themselves further.

Students' coping mechanisms broadly fall under the notion of 'keeping busy', including: physical exercise (e.g., walking, running), intellectual activities (e.g. doing university work or learning new things outside of their work), mindfulness activities (meditating, enjoying time alone), social activities (calling friends, meeting up outside when permitted) and what many participants referred to as 'distractions' (e.g., watching Netflix, reading, social media). Some said that they predominately consumed media that did not handle difficult topics, as that was a better distraction than those that did:

"I tried to dedicate time to meditation and to myself. Reading books, watching movies, talking at the phone with friends also helped. When I have time I also take walks outside to see people (even if from far away) and to feel still connected to "something" (Student – Questionnaire)

Overall, students distinguished between 'good coping' and 'bad coping'. For some, this involved a distinction between 'productive' and 'unproductive' activities, for others 'harmful' (e.g., drug use, drinking, falling back into 'bad habits') and non-harmful activities:

"Reaching out to friends online, getting frustrated over not being able to see and touch and hug people, isolating myself even more, hobby baking, excessive exercising, bouncing back to previous bad pattern (disordered eating / dieting, alcohol, smoking) immersing myself in reading/watching series as an escapism" (Student – Questionnaire)

Many also expressed that they did not "cope" with their feelings of loneliness and social isolation – but that they waited for them to pass. Others emphasised how they tried to remain hopeful that things would get better. Several of these comments were made by students who shared that they had struggled with their mental health prior to the pandemic:

"[I'm coping] by trying to be positive in the belief that this situation will end at some point" (Student – Questionnaire)

"It doesn't help, if one was already struggling with mental health. If one feels alone constantly, and as if there is no place in this world one could call home. If the thought of the family makes one dizzy but being locked inside the room as well" (Student – Questionnaire)

Some explained that not being able to see or touch people was difficult and that it made them feel disconnected to others, making them isolate themselves even more. This experience was also highlighted as particularly strong amongst students who were shielding, who found the combination of being separated from others, in a small space and with online work to be overwhelming – impacting on their mental health and feelings of loneliness and disconnection:

"Please think about the impact of shielding, particularly the first 6 months where isolating from immediately family etc was imposed. I had to move out of the marital bed and spent my 24th wedding anniversary alone. I worked, studied and lived in a small single spare bedroom because my husband was a frontline worker. The impact of being confined plus working remotely, plus studying, living ceased to happen you existed and waited for release" (Student – Questionnaire)

Connection was also present in accounts about the shared experience of the pandemic and knowing that you are *"in it together"*. Several students also emphasised that this shared experience has made it more acceptable to talk about feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as more people have experienced it. This shared experience becomes something you can bond over and – to some extent – make jokes about:

"People just laugh about it. Casually talk about depression in person and online. Joke about feeling nothing, despair, loneliness. As casually as talking about the weather. It's become the thing we can bond over" (Student – Questionnaire)

However, some explained that people around them had started sharing more dark thoughts with them to a greater extent than prior to the pandemic:

"One of my friends shared that they had suicidal thoughts and another shared that they didn't see the point to life. Prior to Covid, I never had friends or peers share such dark thoughts with me" (Student – Questionnaire)

A greater openness about feelings of loneliness and/or social isolation, as well as mental health, overall was something many students wished to continue after the pandemic, involving seeing both more available support for people who are struggling as well as less stigma attached to seeking that support and in speaking out:

"I think that poor mental health feelings have been more accepted this last year as no one has escaped some aspect of negative experiences. We were more understanding, and I hope that this understanding continues and stays for supporting individuals who may be struggling mentally" (Student – Questionnaire)

Although most accounts focused on how students had struggled during this time, some also emphasised how the pandemic had been a learning experience:

"This year taught us a lot. How to value time, solitude, introspection, fears" (Student Questionnaire)

Discussion and conclusion

To recap, the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst students at Queen Margaret University during COVID-19. To address this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

- Q1: What mechanisms and services are available to QMU students who are experiencing loneliness or social isolation?
- Q2: What is the nature of the lived experience of loneliness or social isolation amongst students?
- Q3: What are the coping behaviours, mechanisms, strategies and tools of QMU students experiencing loneliness and social isolation?

The qualitative and quantitative data generated in this research reveal the varied experiences of students across the university and student groups. In line with previous research that emphasise how students with pre-existing mental health conditions were likely to experience additional adversity related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gillard et al., 2021), our quantitative data suggests that pre-exposure to loneliness and social isolation prior to COVID-19 can predict the likelihood of feeling greater loneliness and isolation during the pandemic; this may offer insights related to the state or trait debate within loneliness literature (Hu et al., 2015). Moreover, as well as individual psychological factors, environmental situation (particularly living status) can also impact upon students; rather than quantity of people nearby, our findings suggest it is the quality of relationship and living status (student accommodation vs non-student living) that impacts loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19. Diehl et al. (2018) similarly highlighted a quality versus quantity distinction when discussing social and emotional loneliness amongst students pre-pandemic.

Furthermore, the data show that students in level 1 are marginally lonelier compared to students in level 2, significantly less lonely than levels 3 and 4, yet significantly more socially isolated than those in levels 2 and 3. This finding, partially, contrasts with previous studies conducted pre-pandemic, demonstrating that first year students report the highest levels of both loneliness and social isolation (Özdemir & Tuncay, 2008). Although students staying in QMU halls are considerably less socially isolated than those living at home with parents or a partner, they feel significantly lonelier. Again, this suggests it is not the number of people surrounding students that is an important factor, but rather the quality (or lack of) connections with people within the university community. Our qualitative data also show that loneliness and social isolation was experienced differently across students emphasising the specific challenges they faced during the pandemic. Ample research has been conducted on international students' experiences of loneliness before the pandemic (e.g., Tsai, Wang & Wei, 2017; Wawera & McCamley, 2020) but more research is required to understand the experience and impact of loneliness and social isolation within other distinct student groups.

The notion of the lack of community, sense of belonging and connection to other students featured heavily in students' qualitative accounts, a finding which chimes with Gravett and Winstone's (2022) recent study highlighting the importance of meaningful and authentic connections amongst students and the experience of alienation when interaction or communication breaks down. In our study, the lack of connection and community was underpinned by the difficulty in building relationships online and missing opportunities to engage in co-constructed learning with their peers in physical spaces. Thereby, our findings highlight the impact of the lack of student-student and student-staff social micro-interactions and informal interactions in both academic, public and liminal spaces and how this relates to experiences of loneliness and social isolation. Experience of detachment in the context of online study specifically have previously been noted by Ali and Smith (2015), however, their focus was on students who had intentionally enrolled in online university study which the majority of our sample had not (see also Elmer et al., 2020). In line with O'Sullivan et al's (2021) suggestion that social institutions, such as universities can strengthen the sense of community and bring back positive connection by developing interventions through understanding the lived experience of relevant groups and individuals, we aim to further investigate what community means amongst QMU students.

The qualitative findings revealed the many and diverse ways in which students coped with their feelings of loneliness and social isolation, with their coping mechanisms broadly involving 'keeping busy' (physically, intellectually, socially) and 'distractions' (see also Vaarala et al.,

2013; Wawera & McCamley, 2020). QMU students predominately sought emotional support from family members, partners and close friends. As opposed to the students in Vasileiou et al.'s (2019) study, who reported similar behaviours, the COVID-19 restrictions did not allow many students to seek help from people face-to-face (although that would have been preferred) but did so predominately through video and phone calls. Some students also expressed that such interactions made it harder to 'keep up' with friendships and other relationships, as little had happened, and that conversations often stayed at superficial or humorous levels which, for some, deepened their feelings of loneliness and lack of connection. Relatively few in our sample had reached out to QMU's student services at the time they completed the questionnaire, but the data indicates that although they did not make use of the services, they were largely aware of their existence (except those that did not pertain to the respondent, e.g., support for armed forces or estranged students). However, students expressed that they had predominately relied on academic staff for help, reaching out to them first hand – and their Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) in particular – but that their experiences of doing so had varied. As such, further research is required to better understand how PATs can be supported to be able to better support their students; to improve students' awareness of where to turn for support for specific issues; and how best to enhance their understanding of the type and level of support the PAT and other academic staff are expected to offer.

Implications for practice

This research highlighted the experience of students primarily during lockdown conditions. However, the salient messages regarding student loneliness and isolation and the mechanisms that were employed by students to help them through this period present a compelling narrative that can be drawn on to improve our practice going forward. These implications for practice are especially valid given growing evidence internationally that student loneliness and isolation are widespread and experienced whether learning online or in person. The data generated through this study suggests we should aim to

- Encourage student interaction in groups of varying size to build community and sense of belonging in the cohort/programme and in the university overall
- **Raise** awareness amongst students and staff of what to expect/provide in terms of PAT support and its importance
- Consider ways to build community online and how to encourage all students to engage
- Reflect on how feeling part of a community affects the student experience
- Highlight the importance of opportunities for informal interaction for students and staff

- **Build** awareness of transition points across the student journey (including 'non-traditional' journeys, as well as transition points between years of study etc.)
- **Involve** and inform peers (e.g., class reps) in welcoming/supporting students who enter as DEs
- **Emphasise** that support services are not there only for students when "something bad has already happened"
- **Clarify** processes of support from PAT onwards
- **Recognise** student resilience and capability to build community
- **Celebrate** the advantage we have as a small one-campus institution to build community and inclusion.

This research was undertaken by Mhairi Robertson, Olivia Sagan and Linnea Wallen, colleagues from the Division of Psychology, Sociology and Education at Queen Margaret University who are part of the broader Enhancement Theme team. Questions and comments to: osagan@qmu.ac.uk

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TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics of Student Participants					
	Ν	%		Ν	%
Sexuality			Living Status		
Heterosexual	155	65.4	At home with partner	65	27.9
Bisexual	40	16.9	At home with parents/Guardians	52	22.3
Homosexual	12	5.1	On QMU Campus	45	19.3
Pansexual	11	4.6	Off-Campus Shared Accommodation	42	18
Prefer not to Say	9	3.8	On my own	29	12.4
Asexual	5	2.1	Distinctive student groups		
Not listed	5	2.1	Work	104	50.7
Gender Identity			Mature student	89	43.4
Woman	188	79	First Generation to attend university	87	42.4
Man	34	14.3	Additional QMU Responsibilities	67	32.7
Non-Binary	5	2.1	I have a Disability	36	17.1
Gender-fluid	3	1.3	Parent	23	11.2
Agender	1	0.4	Carer	22	10.7
Gender Queer	3	1.3	Estranged student	3	1.5
Prefer not to Say	4	1.7	Foster Leaver	2	1
Ethnicity			Division		
White	210	90.5	Psychology, Sociology and Education	68	29.2
Asian	14	6	Dietetics, Nutrition, Biological Sciences, Physiotherapy, podiatry and Radiography	54	23.2
Mixed	4	1.7	Media, Communications and Performing Arts	42	18
Black	2	.9	Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies	27	11.6
Other	2	.9	Business	17	7.2
Age			Speech and Hearing Sciences	12	5.2
Maximum	64		Nursing	9	3.9
Minimum	18		Institute for Global Health and Development	4	1.7
Moon	26.5		COVID PHASE		
Weall	20.3		Phase 1	134	57.5
Student status:			Phase 2	33	22
Undergraduate	170	73	Phase 3	47	20.2
Taught Postgraduate	52	22.3	Year (Undergraduates Only)		
Doctorate Student	10	43	Level 1	37	24.7
	10	т.3	Level 2	33	22
Associate Student	1	04	Level 3	48	32
	I	0.7	Level 4	32	21.3

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics of Staff Participants							
	Ν	%		Ν	%		
My Contract is:			I work:				
Permanent/Open Ended	62	88.6	Full Time	43	62.3		
Fixed Term	7	10	Part time	25	36.2		
Hourly Paid	1	1.4	Non-Core Staff	1	1.4		
Ethnicity			I am a member of:				
White	62	88.6	Academic Staff	53	75.7		
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	2	2.9	University's Secretary Group	7	10		
Another Ethnic Group	1	1.4	Senior Leadership Team	2	2.9		
Black, African, British, or Caribbean	1	1.4	Campus and Commercial Services	2	2.9		
Country of Origin:			Other	6	8.6		
Rest of UK	21	30	In the Following Division (Academic Staff):				
The Americas	5	7.1	Psychology, Sociology and Education	14	26.4		
Europe	4	5.7	Nursing	10	18.9		
Africa	1	1.4	Media, Communication & Performing Arts	9	17		
Oceania	1	1.4	Occupational therapy and Art Therapies	7	13.2		
Prefer not to Say	5	7.1	Dietetics, Nutrition, Biological Sciences, Physiotherapy, Podiatry and Radiography	6	11.3		
Country of Origin:			Speech and Hearing Sciences	4	7.5		
Rest of UK	21	30	The Business School	3	5.7		
The Americas	5	7.1	I've worked at QMU for:				
Europe	4	5.7	More than 4 years	44	62.9		
Africa	1	1.4	1 to 4 years	15	21.4		
Oceania	1	1.4	6 months to 1 year	8	11.4		
Prefer Not to Say	5	7.1	Less than 6 months	3	4.3		

Briefing 2020-21 Enhancement Theme at QMU: Loneliness and Isolation

Scotland's Enhancement Themes

The national programme of <u>Enhancement Themes</u> 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 <u>Resilient Learning</u> <u>Communities</u> 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 towards the end of February 2021 to gather further information about existing resources and strategies to help manage loneliness and isolation. In the questionnaire we will also gather feedback on the type of support and resources that might be useful for the University community. We plan to gather student feedback by adding additional questions to the QMU Internal Student Survey. We will follow up on survey responses with student focus groups later in the year.

How you can get involved

We would encourage you to complete the staff questionnaire once this is available. In the meantime, if you would like to let us know about any resources or strategies to support students experiencing loneliness and isolation, you can submit these to Dawn Martin, Secretary to the Institutional Team. 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 1998ⁱ has even been seen as 'The Leprosy of the 21st Century'ⁱⁱ and indeed there is a raft of evidence that a substantial proportion of today's Western populations is lonelyⁱⁱⁱ. Amidst this international rise in concern the UK government appointed a minister for Loneliness in 2018, but was less forthcoming about how the post might intersect with austerity targets which included cuts to

social care and welfare benefit that 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^{iv} and even suggests a correlation with earlier mortality ^v. 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 ^{vi}.

What is it?

Loneliness is complex, subject to temporal shifts, shaped by cultural and gender determinants^{vii} and socially constructed^{viii}. In keeping with the Loneliness Strategy^{ix} loneliness is defined here as: "a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship". It may arise when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want, therefore 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^x which 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^{xi}. In short, it may be that as we become more anxious about being lonely as we absorb the deficit discourse about being alone, the more our levels of tolerance are being eroded, and we may have even less opportunity to develop the capacity to be alone^{xii} and even to 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^{xiii}. Studies investigating associations with culture^{xiv}; gender ^{xv} social media^{xvi}, Internet ^{xvii}, smartphone use ^{xviii}, attachment^{xix}, mental distress^{xx}, academic performance^{xxi} and social identity ^{xxii} 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^{xxiii} 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 his period that we decided to undertake this project exploring loneliness at QMU and what system, structures and support mechanisms exist for students who may be experiencing this very human, but nevertheless distressing emotional and psychological state.

Table 3. Student Service Awareness &	Usage during	COVID-19.
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Service Use	% Participants who use service	% Participants aware of service but do not use	% Participants unaware of service	
Other lecturer/tutor support	68.1%	29.4%	3.0%	
Personal Academic Tutor (PAT)	65.9%	30.8%	4.5%	
School Office	42.8%	49.1%	6.0%	
LRC Helpdesk	38.9%	52.3%	7.0%	
Student funding service/finance	38.0%	55.6%	7.5%	
Effective Learning Service	34.5%	59.8%	6.5%	
Dissertation Supervision	31.9%	44.4%	21.9%	
Peer Assisted Learning (PALS)	25.8%	61.2%	13.4%	
Technical support	25.3%	53.7%	18.9%	
Wellbeing service	24.0%	65.4%	10.0%	
Disability service	22.7%	67.3%	10.0%	
Student Union	21.8%	73.4%	3.5%	
ResLife	21.4%	47.2%	29.9%	
Careers and Employability support	21.0%	73.8%	5.0%	
Placement support	17.5%	42.5%	40.3%	
Studiosity	17.5%	30.8%	53.2%	
Liaison Librarian	17.0%	67.3%	15.4%	
Counselling service	16.2%	66.8%	17.4%	
Togetherall	5.7%	15.4%	82.1%	
Doctoral Research Coordinator/ Graduate School	4.4%	40.7%	51.2%	
COVID-19 enquiries helpline	3.9%	57.0%	40.3%	
Thinking of Leaving service	3.5%	46.7%	50.7%	
Support for student carers	2.6%	52.3%	43.8%	
Other	1.3%	21.5%	37.3%	
Support for estranged students	0.9%	40.7%	57.2%	
Support for care leavers	0.9%	42.5%	54.7%	
Support for Armed forces/ ex-services and their families	0.0%	36.0%	62.7%	
Notes. Bolded= % Participants > 50%				

Table 4. Service Efficacy

Student Service Extremely Very Moderately Slightly Not Effective Student Service at all	Student Service	Extremely Effective	Very Effective	Moderately Effective	Slightly Effective	Not Effective at all
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Lecturer (Most Used Service)	49%	33%	16%	3%	1%
Personal Academic Tutor (Second Most Used Service)	40%	33%	18%	4%	4%
Togetherall (Highest number of students unaware of service)	8%	15%	46%	23%	8%
Careers & Employability (Highest Number aware but do not use)	32%	45%	15%	9%	0%

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