

# **The Lonely Campus?**

An Exploration of Student Loneliness  
in UK Higher Education

October 2021

Dr Richard Vytنيorgu | Dr Fred Cooper | Dr Charlotte Jones |  
Professor Manuela Barreto | Professor Mark Jackson

## Contents

Executive Summary	1
Recommendations	2
The Purpose of the Research	3
Methodology	4
Report Findings	5
1. The Challenge of Being Authentic	5
2. The Impact of University Structures	8
3. Connections to the Wider Community	12
The Impact of COVID-19	15
Recommendations	17
Conclusion	18
Further Reading	20

# Executive Summary

Student loneliness is an increasingly important mental health issue that has been found to negatively impact academic and social adjustment to life at university<sup>1</sup>.

Loneliness appears to be a particularly significant challenge for UK universities. In a 2017 survey by Soxedo, for example, 46% of UK university students admitted to experiencing loneliness at university, compared to 32% of students in the rest of the world<sup>2</sup>.

Contrary to popular opinion, which suggests that older people are more likely to experience loneliness than younger populations, recent research suggests that younger people are likely to experience loneliness 'more acutely and painfully' than older cohorts, possibly due to the number of transitions faced by young people during adolescence and young adulthood<sup>3</sup>. An AXA poll found that those aged 18-24 were more likely to experience loneliness 'most of the time' in comparison to respondents aged 70 and over<sup>4</sup>. These figures indicate that the loneliness experienced by students is a sector-wide problem that requires addressing not only in universities, but across society as a whole.

This study on student loneliness at University of Exeter campuses suggests that student loneliness is a multi-faceted experience, affected by multiple dimensions of life at university. Three key components are discussed in this report. First, students report the need to be authentic with themselves and with other students. This relates to preoccupations with emerging and transformative identity as students negotiate life stage transitions, geographical relocation, and contact with

new people and social groups. Second, university infrastructure (such as the university year structure), built environment, and accommodation create certain expectations of how student life should progress which, when unfulfilled, create further loneliness.

Third, the students interviewed felt uneasy that opportunities for community and relationships tended to revolve around the university. They expressed a desire to feel more connected to civic and community societies and activities that could help them feel more linked to life beyond the university in Exeter.

These are the primary themes highlighted by this study. They pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic but will remain pertinent once the impact of the pandemic begins to recede and students return to a semblance of normal university life. Our follow-up research shows the pandemic did impact students' sense of loneliness, particularly in missing the day-to-day human contact that normal life on campus can offer. Students felt that their work patterns and spaces were disrupted, but that the best kind of university support came from their immediate educational providers (i.e. their Departments), rather than from central communications sent to the student and staff population as a whole. This report offers twelve recommendations for preventing and mitigating student loneliness on campus in ways that respond to each of the three core themes arising from the workshops with students that took place in the autumn of 2019 and in April 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Wohn & LaRose, 2014; Vasileiou et al., 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Bhaiyat et al., 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Vasileiou et al., 2019, p. 22; Rokach, 2000; Cutrona, 1982; Ponzetti, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Bhaiyat et al., 2018.

## Recommendations

- Create and distribute among students (possibly via the Student Guild) a list of approved Exeter-based civic and community societies and opportunities for student involvement – organisations that could facilitate volunteering, rather than a list of opportunities themselves.
- Relieve pressure on first-year students to find second-year accommodation quickly. One way to do so is by liaising with the Studentpad portal to advise landlords not to advertise undergraduate student accommodation until Christmas each year.
- Consider providing university-wide communications through Departments (or Colleges), to foster greater connection between students and their direct educational facilitators.
- Provide clarity to students in halls of residence about how they may personalise their rooms and, where possible, provide students at move-in with a 'Hack Your Halls' box, containing 'items to safely decorate and personalise the space, perhaps a "Do Disturb" door sign when people are feeling social, wayfinding to mental health services, ability to set up floor or building WhatsApp groups and other items'. The 'Hack Your Halls' initiative was pioneered by the Loneliness Lab with London College of Communication students.
- Continue to ensure student safety by maintaining adequate lighting on all areas of the campus where footpaths intersect large amounts of foliage/shrubbery and by offering better signage to walking routes around campus.
- Consider adding more low-maintenance indoor plants to study spaces on campus so that students feel more connected to nature while working.
- Further involve students in the creation of student marketing materials, to represent the University as students experience it.
- Ensure that welcome days and contact with personal tutors and year tutors include a focus on mental health and social connection, involving not only discussions around what might help students in that cohort connect, but also encouraging them to feel responsible for each other's inclusion.
- Provide training on mental health and community formation to Welfare reps of student societies, and as part of their role prioritise inclusion and creating a welcoming environment for new members.
- Establish a Student Prospectus Committee, for students to offer timely feedback on the content of university marketing material (especially related to wording regarding the 'student experience'), to foster a more realistic and accurate representation of life at Exeter, including some of the challenges.
- Support the formation and embedding of a student lived experience group to advise on university policy on health, welfare, and wellbeing.
- Ensure that building social connections is not a luxury but core to what students do as they learn, for example by using more collaborative learning techniques. To achieve this, the University might need to provide some training, or make resources available to staff about how to embed social connection in teaching.



# The Purpose of the Research

Many students arrive at university with high expectations for sociability, friendship, and belonging.

At the same time, however, there is extensive international evidence that many students feel excluded from vital networks and communities, and experience significant loneliness over the course of their education<sup>5</sup>. This research set out to explore students' experiences of loneliness at two University of Exeter campuses, Streatham and St Luke's.

The workshops conducted formed part of the Student Lived Experience Group, which was founded in 2019 by Dr Fred Cooper and Dr Charlotte Jones as part of a Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health Beacon project on loneliness and community in higher education. This project was supported by the University of Exeter Provost's Fund. The purpose of this group is to co-create research and policy on student loneliness and mental health.

Findings from the workshops will inform the development of a number of academic outputs, using the case study of loneliness at the University of Exeter as a springboard for a more conceptual exploration of the interconnections between loneliness and belonging at university.

Finally, as the research developed, a secondary purpose of the research was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic and related public health measures impacted students' experiences of loneliness at the University, and to develop some recommendations for university responses to student experiences of loneliness on campus.



<sup>5</sup> Bhaiyat et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2019; Pijpers, 2017.

## Methodology

A total of 29 students were recruited through posters on campus, departmental mailing lists, and lecture announcements.

The groups were composed of undergraduate and postgraduate students, with a mixture of ages, genders, disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and home or international status. Participants were informed beforehand of the purpose of the research, and what taking part would involve, and were provided with an outline of the possible benefits and disadvantages of taking part. The work was approved by the University of Exeter's Humanities Ethics Committee.

The study was comprised of eight two-hour workshops, with up to 12 participants in each. Six of these were held before the COVID-19 pandemic, between October and December 2019. Two further workshops were held online in April 2020.

The workshops were split into two sections. The first half asked students to discuss a questionnaire on student loneliness taken from the 1940s, which then led into a broader conversation about students' experiences of loneliness, belonging, and community at university more generally. In the second half of the workshop, students were presented with a large map of the Streatham or St Luke's campus and asked to annotate where they felt happiest and which places they associated negatively, i.e. with feelings of loneliness. This exercise generated discussion targeted more specifically to the campus environment.

Workshops were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. A Confidential Briefing was produced by Cooper and Jones in July 2020 as part of the early-stage analysis of the workshops, and to inform institutional responses to the social and psychological effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

The main themes identified when analysing the material were:

- **1. The challenges of being authentic**, in relation to: managing expectations; fears of missing out on social media and in-person connections; anxieties related to class and social status; and broader mental health concerns relating to anxiety, depression and alienation.
- **2. The impact of university structures** – both physical and psychological – relating to progression of studies, narratives of Freshers' Week, and idealised expectations about 'what uni is supposed to be like'.
- **3. Feeling connected to the wider community**, particularly concerns over student life revolving almost exclusively around the university.

These organising themes relate to experiences of student loneliness at Exeter reported prior to the pandemic. The workshops that occurred during the pandemic reflected back on pre-existing experiences of loneliness whilst also placing them in the new context of COVID-19 and the first national lockdown, which was in place at the time of the workshops in April 2020.

The recommendations outlined here built on those created in the initial briefing in 2020. Further discussion will follow in peer-reviewed publications and policy reports.

# Report Findings

## 1. The Challenge of Being Authentic

One of the primary concerns raised by students in this study relates to the challenge of being authentic, particularly in Freshers' Week when everyone and everything is new and unfamiliar, and first impressions feel significant.

Authenticity is a contested and ambiguous concept, but it seemed to resonate with students in this study, many of whom framed their desire to be honest with themselves about their likes, dislikes, habits and personal character in terms of being authentic. Loneliness ensued when students felt that personal traits were being suppressed, overlooked, or replaced by other behaviours in order to fit in. Specifically, being authentic is connected to: the role of social media and the fear of missing out (FOMO); aspects associated with class, social status, and age; and broader mental health issues and the ability of the University wellbeing service to address these satisfactorily and sensitively.

### 1.1. Social Media and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

As one student summarised:

'I know a lot of people who tend to want to be around other people even if they don't particularly get along with them or like them just because they don't want to be alone. I feel like that is a lot of pressure on a student.' (Female, workshop 1)

While most of the students reported varying levels of unease around the expectations felt around socialising, particularly in the early weeks of university life, the role of social media in fuelling this anxiety was particularly highlighted:

'There is always the fear of missing out. When they are looking at social media they are automatically like, oh my god, this is not what is happening for me.' (Female, workshop 1)

Another commented:

'These people are just taking pictures and putting them on Facebook with their friends, but in real life they are not that close.' (Female, workshop 1)

This sense of disconnection between what happens online and what happens 'in real life' was judged harshly by one student:

'We all post the good stuff, but it is not particularly helpful in terms of your expectations. It gives a rather falsified outlook on life at times.' (Male, workshop 1)

When this happens repeatedly, and when students face a double-edged fear of missing out, the consequences for mental health and a sense of loneliness can be acute:

'I think it has to do with fear of missing out. Everybody wants to look like they are having fun and wants to show others to prove to themselves kind of that they are having fun, they are having a great time, but nobody actually wants to share negative feelings because negative feelings aren't cool, know what I mean? People don't want to present themselves in a way that will make others judge them.' (Female, workshop 6)



## 1.2. Class, Social Status, and Age

When asked to suggest places on the Streatham campus map that were experienced as particularly lonely or where students liked going, aspects of class, social status, and age came to the forefront. In other words, experiences of social inequalities in the student population have a significant impact on the frequency and severity of loneliness.

Class and wealth disparities at Exeter were described as especially visible by some participants. This was illustrated by the reputation attributed to different halls of residence:

‘Penny C is posh but people don’t think they are posh. They are very gap yah [gap year]. Holland is super posh. Everyone went to the same private school and they have got the same signet rings.’ (Female, workshop 1)

Another student noted that:

‘It is very evident, the divide between some people who have never really met people that don’t go to private school or haven’t lived that sort of lifestyle compared to people who like me went to a normal state school’. (Female, workshop 5)

Some mature students commented on the way the campus seemed heavily populated by younger students than them:

‘I feel like a leper on campus at times because it is based around a specific demographic, a specific age group largely. You get a few of us older ones trying to shuffle around the place and get from one step to another with sticks and things! There is no specific place for us as groups to go. People find it more difficult to mix with people of a much younger age group because it looks a bit weird, for one thing. You don’t want some 65-year-old hanging around with you.’ (Male, workshop 5)

Mature students described a lack of interventions to help facilitate their engagement with each other, or with students closer to the stereotypical 18-21 age demographic. This resulted in a ‘divided’ campus, in which mature students were left feeling excluded by patterns of social avoidance which verged on stigma.

## 1.3. Authenticity and Mental Health

Students expressed considerable concern over the possible mental health consequences involved in trying to be authentic, which in this study related to concerns over being genuine or true to themselves – ensuring that they behaved in ways that were consistent with what they wanted to do. As one student noted:

‘You don’t want to seem like you are not trying [...] if you don’t feel like you are being authentically yourself when you are going to these things then any benefit that you do get out of that and any friendship that you do form is just going to be based on some persona that you are putting on or the character that you assume when you are trying to fit in.’ (Male, workshop 1)

Other students discussed the complex feelings and emotions involved in holding back aspects of themselves when meeting others for the first time:

‘You have to restrain your personality.’ (Male, workshop 2)

‘You don’t want to come on too strong.’ (Female, workshop 2)

‘I think you’re afraid of hurting yourself aren’t you? You don’t want to say, “I have a deep, crippling fear of blah,” and then that person just doesn’t get it. It’s really, really scary to open up.’ (Female, workshop 2)

‘It’s that struggle for authenticity, in the sense of you want to be yourself, because that’s when you’re most happy, but sometimes



there's a situation you have to be really into something that you're not, or whatever.' (Female, workshop 2)

Students' quests for authenticity were a recurrent thread throughout the workshops, both before and during COVID-19, and many questioned their confidence in relationships and the intentions of others. As one student expressed it: 'How do I know that if you're talking to me, you're just talking to me because you want to be polite, or you're actually really interested and want to be my friend?'

Some students who were struggling also mentioned accessing support via the Wellbeing Service. However, difficulties were experienced here too:

'It's painful to open up and talk to those people, just going to a stranger. It's a two-way relationship. It's difficult to make friends as it is, and ideally your friends would be the people, the people you have around you would be those people that you can open up to and support. But instead, you're going

to a stranger who might be fucking crap [laughter]. And I've had that; I've gone to a counsellor and they're like, "Oh, that sounds really horrible." [...] And it's just a complete stranger, and you want relationship. You don't necessarily want people to say the right things, tick the boxes of what... "We're providing a service," tick.' (Male, workshop 4)

Some of the students in this study were not necessarily looking for a comprehensive counselling or therapy service from Wellbeing, but rather an empathetic ear or a lasting, reciprocal friendship – somebody who might engage with experiences where, as one student put it, 'I don't connect with anyone or don't belong somewhere. It's something to do with my inner self' (Female, workshop 6). In other words, for this student, the counselling service did not fulfil their desire for friendship. One anxiety that students voiced in discussions was that any expression of difficulty would immediately be escalated to a formal 'problem', when that may not be what was wanted or needed.



## 2. The Impact of University Structures

Students' experiences of loneliness are structural as well as relational, with aspects of the University contributing to loneliness in multiple ways.

First, students circulate a number of implicit and explicit narratives of social life and relationships, which are weighted with expectations for success and apprehensions of failure. Second, students respond emotionally to the built environment of the campus, with a strong preference for safe green spaces, and feelings of alienation in places and spaces that are experienced as impersonal. Third, student accommodation plays a vital part in how, when, and where students experience loneliness.

### 2.1. University Infrastructure

Students reported arriving at university already burdened with expectations about how their experience should pan out: it's supposed to be 'the time of your life' (Female: 2:9). 'I'm going to have so many friends, it's going to be great'; but when this doesn't happen as expected, 'you suddenly think I'm doing something wrong, I'm messing this all up' (Female: 2:9).

Even before students arrive at university in Freshers' Week, the university encourages potentially unrealistic expectations, some of which were seeded at Open Day by staff and student ambassadors. As one student ambassador explained:

'At the trainings they tell us that we need to talk about positive experiences [...] They tell us that we should just show the positive sides. There are a lot of positive sides. I love studying here, but there are some downsides. I think there are to literally everything and every university you went to. I am not encouraged to speak about negative sides.' (Female, workshop 5)

It is not surprising, therefore, that students spoke of 'an expectation built up about

university and it being the best time of your life but I don't think that really meets reality' (Female, workshop 6).

Teaching timetables and leisure time on the weekends also led to challenges for some students who were accustomed to family routines. For example, weekends were particularly difficult for some:

'The weekends [are] particularly [lonely], back home my dad works in another city and he would come home on the weekend so that used to be really nice family time for us because that was the only time we would see him all week. Now what I have started to do is keep myself insanely busy. I do laundry, clean up my room, cook for the next three days, just so that I don't end up thinking about it, which is probably not great. It is weird because it gives you a sense of accomplishment that even though I am alone right now, I am managing, which is weird. That keeps the loneliness away.' (Female, workshop 1)

Other students commented on the way the year structure presented an unrealistic narrative of social progression that was hard to live up to:

'Seems like everyone is so desperate the first couple of weeks, anyone you can, you form a bond with. And then you become very reluctant to meet anyone else.' (Female, workshop 2)

'I think the pressure's accelerated in the first year as well.' (Female, workshop 4)

'I think when you go further into your studies, when you're in your second or third year, it's even more difficult to socialise because the other students have already established their

own close circles of these very close friends.’  
(Male, workshop 2)

Pressure to find accommodation for the second year in the early stages of the first year (typically November-December) increased students’ anxiety about conforming to progression narratives and securing lasting relationships under conditions of stress:

‘there’s so much pressure, because people just go, “Well, have you got one? Oh well, I signed, and it was a cheap one, and it was close to campus, and you’re not going to get one.” So, I think regardless of if you feel like you haven’t got any friends, to then go and just shoehorn yourself into a group that you maybe don’t feel that you belong in, is really difficult as well. That is an accelerated pressure. Because I know in some cases they don’t really start looking until after Christmas, which makes so much more sense.’ (Female, workshop 4)

‘I think the housing thing, that’s definitely been a cause of immense stress. It’s definitely highlighted that I can feel quite lonely and isolated at uni. Because lots of people have gone with the people that they’re living with already; that just did not happen with my flat. It was like, they all went off with their separate friendship groups, and I was like, “Oh, okay, I don’t have anyone, this is great.” But it’s like, I don’t think that would necessarily happen if, like you said, other places do it after Christmas.’ (Female, workshop 4)

‘The people who do the student housing are pushing it and making people... I’ve rented loads of different places; I’ve moved around constantly, and it’s not easy, but you can do it in a matter of weeks. It’s getting a group of people to share with, but they’re trying to push to get people to sign contracts early, which is an artificial pressure enforced from outside.’ (Male, workshop 4)

It seems clear that students feel intense pressure, not just in the first year, but potentially throughout their degree course, to find and maintain appropriate accommodation. Sourcing accommodation is fraught with anxieties about friendship groups, and the prospect of multiple moves intensifies these anxieties around suitable housemates.

## 2.2. Green Spaces

For many of the students, the built environment and the green spaces embedded within it had the ability to either increase or decrease a sense of loneliness. As one student commented: ‘I know the environment really shapes how you interact with people and things like that’ (Female, workshop 2).

When campus spaces feel alien, ugly or inhibiting, students’ sense of place is affected: ‘It’s like concrete towers, when I walk through it, is the feel you get from it. It’s just these big flats and it’s not really somewhere you want to hang out’ (Female: 2:29). Another student added:

‘if you are not happy and you are in a place that looks like..... a POW camp or something, it makes you feel more depressed. I think the physical environment has an effect on you.’ (Male, workshop 5)

Although retrofitting campus buildings with these challenges in mind is likely beyond the scope of what the University can plausibly do, student sociability could be incorporated more forcefully into future design and planning.

Most of the students who participated commented on the powerful effect of the many green spaces on the Streatham campus:

‘Yes, massive difference. You feel more calm. You can go that way, that really weird path which is from the bottom of the Forum Hill up to Laver building, you can go through that forest. It is so great because trying to

disconnect yourself from everything around and walk for a minute by yourself, then you come back on campus with a completely different mind space, especially with that hearty space nearby the Reed Hall. You can go inside the park and you don't feel like you are on campus anymore.'

(Female, workshop 5)

For some participants, green spaces are experienced as healing and help to offset feelings of loneliness. One student reflected that:

'I think it's like you don't have to be with someone, in nature, to feel like you're part of something bigger if that makes sense, and in terms of loneliness I feel less lonely if I know that I'm part of something bigger, with almost like a greater purpose, and I think nature... the feelings it instils in you is like no matter what you are part of this amazing world and all the amazing things in it and the green spaces, the trees, the beautiful parts of nature that maybe you don't have time or whatever to kind of reflect on normally, and when you are you feel a lot more fulfilled.'

(Female, workshop 6)

One of the crucial elements of successfully utilising green spaces on campus seems to be to incorporate them into students' pursuits. For example:

'They could be utilised more into every day, so the things you're going to do, not just... Like, walking through them is fine, or walking past them, but actually doing something in them or making you want to be in them.'

(Female, workshop 2)

This reflected a need to be active in green spaces, not just consuming natural beauty or receiving passive benefits from a greener

campus. Equally, indoor spaces could attempt to replicate some of these calming and connecting effects. At St Luke's, the current bar used to be a shop and café, but as one student noted:

'I personally think that could have been used as a space for something to do with mental wellbeing, some space for people to either go and talk or maybe I think somebody mentioned putting plants in there. I don't know. Using it for something slightly different than food and drink, because food and drink is great and we've got that, but I think something extra.' (Female, workshop 6)

Similarly, library spaces might be adjusted to accommodate spaces which, as one student suggested, are 'for pleasure, just for fun': 'having a little area, bean bags or something, maybe some refreshments, people can read together' (Female, workshop 6). Many of the supportive infrastructures for a more social and connected University are already fundamentally in place, but require work to transform and optimise them for students' relational health<sup>6</sup>. University leaders are not intervening in a context where important structural assets and resources are wholly absent, but where they are not being used in ways that fully and equally benefit student populations.

### 2.3. Accommodation

Whether students felt lonely or isolated was strongly correlated with how 'at home' they felt in their accommodation, particularly when they were in university halls of residence. Both catered and self-catered halls were singled out for comment, but self-catered seemed to create particular issues because those in catered halls could meet a wider range of students more easily than those restricted to a flat.

<sup>6</sup> Hinchliffe, Jackson, Wyatt, et al., 2018.



One student elaborated at length on his experience of being in a self-catered hall:

‘What happened was there were four or five people who got on, then there were the other four of us who were all in [our] rooms. My room was next to the kitchen. You used to hear every evening people laughing and having a great time. Initially for the first few weeks – I think a lot of freshers will do this – you integrate. People said, “Let’s go out to the club,” or whatever and it is not really my thing, but I thought, I will go with it because I don’t want to turn everything down. You do it and you do that a few times and it is awkward. Then you start to think what are you getting from it really? [...] We had [a social area] – again it was in [previous uni – Russell group, southern UK], but it was actually called the social lounge, which I thought was quite ironic. I used to walk down there a few times. I was in my room so I thought, I will go down and see if anything is going on. Have a go. I walked in and it was virtually always empty. There was no one there. I thought, it has got great facilities and no one uses it. It was so weird to me. I don’t know. I never worked it out.’  
(Male, workshop 1)

The fact that a ‘social lounge’ was devoid of sociality demonstrates the ways in which university self-catered accommodation is not structured to meet students’ needs. Such structures are far from neutral or merely logistical considerations; they shape the ways in which students engage (or not) with each other.

There was a similar story in catered halls:

‘I was in catered halls and there wasn’t a [social] place really set up. There wasn’t a sofa and a TV or like at home you would chill with your family in the lounge. There wasn’t that and I think that was really hard to get used to because you are either at uni or in your bedroom – with people or by yourself.’  
(Female, workshop 1)

The polarization of these university-structured spaces (either on campus or in private bedrooms) leaves little room for intermediate spaces for casual socialising. Even participants living in shared student houses can find it challenging when the bedroom is the primary place to ‘be’ outside of communal and open campus spaces:

‘I hate my bedroom. I live in a town house and there is a big, nice social area downstairs. Don’t get me wrong, there’s often a couple of people down there, but because the corridors are shut off it is impossible to tell who is in and who is not. Everyone can be in or everyone can be out. It is – I am tempted to use the word maddening at times because you never know who is around. It is like living with a house full of ghosts.’  
(Male, workshop 1)

Large homes with several separate living spaces may not provide a welcoming, communal environment without dedicated effort. Insecurity and social uncertainty are not conducive to fostering a sense of belonging in the place in which you live, particularly for students who are already socially anxious or do not know their housemates well.



### 3. Connections to the Wider Community

Students in these workshops emphasised their need to feel connected to life beyond the university and student societies.

First, the students mentioned the negative impact of expectations around drinking in university societies, expressing a view that it could not be taken for granted whether they felt any connection to students whom they met in a society. Students also expressed a desire to have more opportunities to connect to the wider Exeter community, especially via initiatives that could also help address their need for green spaces.

#### 3.1. Student societies

The expectation that drinking alcohol plays a significant role in some student societies was singled out as negative and prohibitive:

‘I think it would be nice if there were more events [...] where you would meet people and it is not predicated on drinking or getting smashed. It is just a nice social space where you will meet people and have a bit of a chat.’ (Male, workshop 1)

This expectation to drink also has the potential to exclude students who are teetotal, alcoholic, or from cultural backgrounds where drinking alcohol is discouraged or proscribed.

Another student noted the disappointment she experienced because of unmanaged expectations about what societies might offer her: ‘Yes, even in societies, which I was like oh cool, that’s my way in. That’s the way I’ll find people who I’ll connect with’ (Female, workshop 2). But as she points out:

‘there will already have been people who would have been in that society for three years already that it’s very awkward, at least in my... Like, a lot of, for example [...] it just feels like I’ve walked into a society that’s

been existent forever and I’m just there like, “Hi, I’m new; I have no idea what’s going on.”’ (Female, workshop 2)

This student highlights how this form of in-group atmosphere was particularly uncomfortable and made the community inaccessible to her, because ‘you can’t just force your way into it when everyone has already made those connections’ (Female, workshop 2).

Simply attending more events and responding to more opportunities to meet people in societies is not always the answer either:

‘Last year especially when I came here, I attended every event, every university event or friends’ invitation, but I didn’t feel a connection with people. I realised I am doing this just to be social but I’m not enjoying being with these people, so I stopped.’ (Female, workshop 6)

Another student, meanwhile, suggested that international students or those who would like to learn about other cultures at the university might appreciate an opportunity to do this, perhaps via food:

‘I would like to go and see other cultures, events, like French, or Italian or something like that. We used to do something like that, like International Food Day, because I studied two years in the US, in Boston, so it was more engaged cultural events like International Food Day, like Lebanon food, Italian food, Indian food, we had some tables to meet people, so it was more sociable like more involving people. It was a melting pot to see people.’ (Female, workshop 6)

Although impractical for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, events which bring students together to eat collectively and share recipes and food could be of use in preventing loneliness in the entire student population.

### 3.2. The Wider City

There are limits to what the university can provide for students via its societies, and many students expressed a wish to feel more connected to the wider community in Exeter.

One student explained that, ‘after realising there were no gardening clubs [at University], I started looking [within the city]’ (Female, workshop 2). She notes:

‘When I was on the high street I saw one in... You know the high street where the buses all come? Sidwell, they have a little gardening thing and I was like oh my god, they have a composting machine, that’s so cool, but I haven’t had a chance to go and actually be like how can I [get] involve[d]...’ (Female, workshop 2)

This student was quite specific about the kind of club she wished to find, whether at the university or in Exeter city: ‘Not an outdoor trekking club, [but something] like foraging. Because there’s so much to forage around here [...] A foraging club would be sick, because you could get to know Exeter’ (Female, workshop 2).

Together the students decided that:

‘There needs to be, at the University at least, signposting to things. There’s lots of stuff going on, be involved in it. But obviously it’s difficult to do if you don’t know about it. Maybe it would involve someone actually having to go down and explore.’ (Female, workshop 2)

One student felt ‘confined to be associated with other students, whereas who knows, in that space over there, there’s a club run by locals for foraging’ (Male, workshop 2). Although this is one area which relies at least in part on students’ individual initiative in looking beyond the University for social and relational opportunities, there are many ways that this could be encouraged or facilitated, for example in visible and accessible signposting to civic or community initiatives.

Another student phrased it this way:

‘I think it’s the strange dichotomy of Exeter, because it’s like both a campus university but it’s also really close to town. You’ve either got city universities where [everything] belongs on the city or campus where everything is on campus, but this is both, because you’re both expected to do everything on campus but you’ve got so many things you can do in the city as well.’ (Female, workshop 2)

While this student is framing Exeter’s Streatham Campus as a challenge to negotiate both city and campus simultaneously, the geographical setting of Exeter’s campus is also worth developing in terms of publicity and support processes for students to successfully navigate both campus and city.

But while students raised the importance of being connected to Exeter city, some also voiced concern over safety, particularly for female students, and especially at night:

‘Every time you want to go out or something there’s always a thing in the back of your head, how am I going to get home? How am I going to stay safe? I do that sort of thing and that might stop you going out, if you think I haven’t got those people who are going to take me home and if I drink too much, what’s going to happen to me?’ (Female, workshop 2)

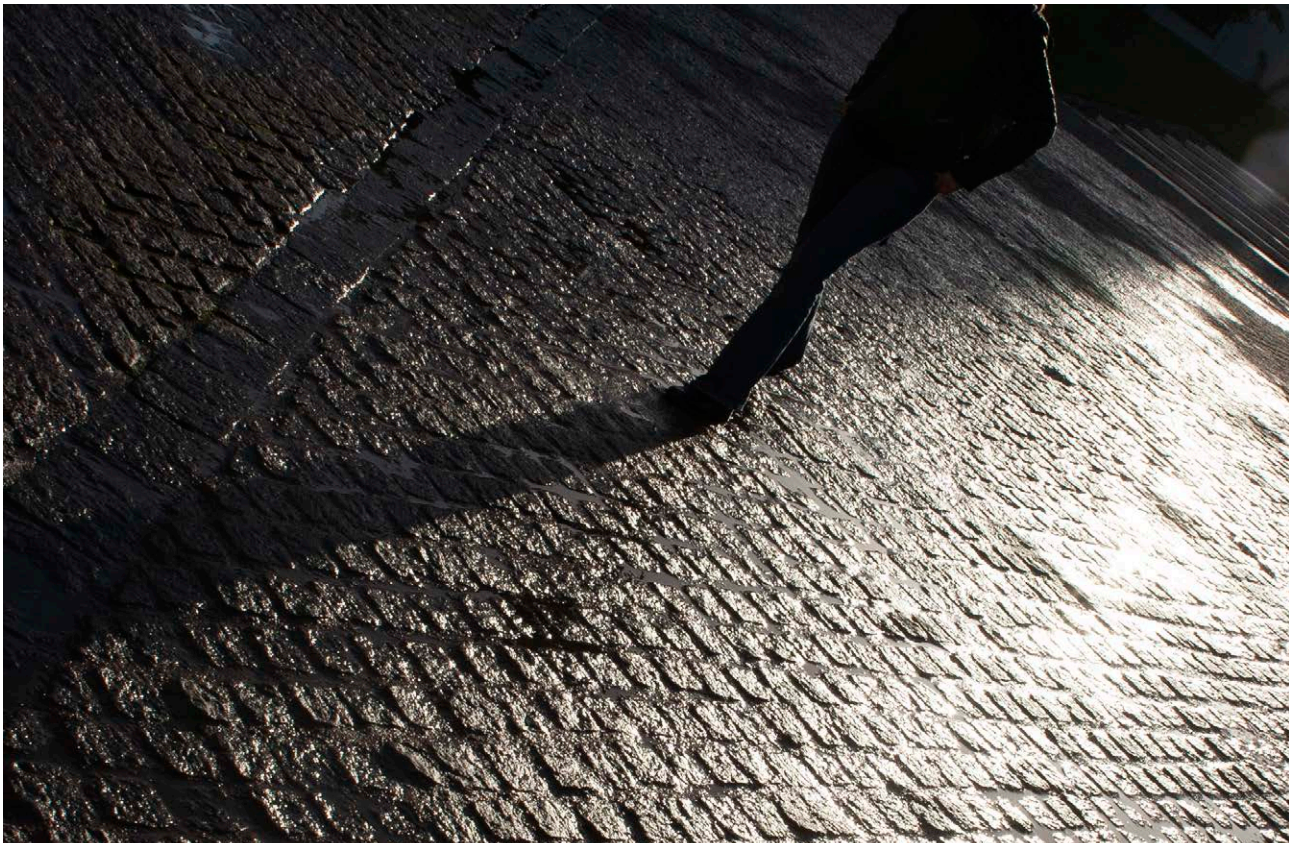
One student noted how difficult it can be for new students especially:

'If you've just come to the area and you don't know anyone and your flatmates aren't going out with you and you were just meeting people at a society event, then you don't have any security back-up or anything, you're not walking home with anybody, you're not going out with anybody.'  
(Female, workshop 2)

These two quotations demonstrate how preventing loneliness and keeping students safe are inextricably linked responsibilities for the University. Any attempt to engage the wider

community would therefore need to embed or highlight a safety policy and a strategy to ensure that students feel safe when walking home, for example by ensuring that activities finish in daylight, and that any green spaces are adequately lit and not too remote from buildings.

The campus and student accommodation may not be experienced as safe by all students, however, highlighting the importance of trusted friends, comfortable living arrangements, and responsive residential support to facilitate student freedom and wellbeing.





## The Impact of COVID-19

The three themes discussed above are vital contexts for loneliness during COVID-19, but the pandemic also imposed dislocating relational experiences that are fundamentally new for the majority of students.

Retaining their salience during COVID-19, evidence from the early interviews reported on by the project allows for a richer understanding of how students experienced the pandemic, as well as the contexts which continue to frame loneliness after the virus recedes.

Two further workshops took place during the pandemic in April 2020, one month after England's first national lockdown was announced. Students were therefore clearly adjusting to the new situation, and the disruption caused by remote learning and relocating (for some) back to the family home.

For many of the students participating in workshops during the pandemic, changes made to their home and working lives were not completely negative. As one student commented:

'I think it might be a different kind of lonely. Because there's some sort of camaraderie with this loneliness, because everyone's like, "Oh, we need to get through it together, we're all going to do this," and of course that's brilliant.' (Female, workshop 7)

Another student commented that:

'I personally have felt really lonely in the past at university, and I actually don't feel that lonely at the moment at all. I think because I'm at home with my mum and dad and my sister and seeing them all the time, I'm not by myself. We're doing nice things in the evenings like watching a movie together or playing cards and stuff, and I don't feel on my own at all and I feel quite supported by my friends and by my family. Whereas in the past at uni, I have felt completely alone, locked myself away in

my room in halls and stuff, and I think maybe as well, knowing what loneliness can look like, I've made an effort since that point to make sure that I'm not lonely.' (Female, workshop 7)

The lockdown and the profound change in living patterns enabled some of the students to re-evaluate how they had been living beforehand, challenging their assumptions that life needed to be fast paced and eventful:

'But we've all kind of had to create a new way of being. And I think that in itself is educational. And also, I think that sometimes doing nothing is okay, and it might take something like this to make you realise that, because we're all so geared up to doing one thing and then ticking that off, and then the next thing, and doing well, but actually it can be really hard.' (Female, workshop 7)

Other students noted they missed the human, day-to-day contact that being on campus could provide:

'It is just being with people. It is fine. We are not virtual beings. We are human and it is a different kind of contact. It is like the three dimensionality of it all when you actually meet people, being physically close to people, being in the same area. It makes a huge difference. It is difficult to describe, but that is the big thing for me.' (Male, workshop 8)

'It is having that contact with people, with people you are used to seeing on a daily basis. I was emailing my tutor yesterday and saying that I am really missing being at university, seeing the buzz. Even though I often complain and think I need somewhere to go and sit and

chill, it is missing that buzz of connection with people.' (Female, workshop 8)

Physical contact and the need to feel physically connected to the university were also experienced alongside some initial frustration with the disorientating new situation: 'we were getting emails from the uni every day with different information, and I couldn't concentrate at all' (Female, workshop 7).

Other students found it really difficult not having anywhere dedicated they could work:

'I've found that it's really hard to try and find a nice space to do work, or where I feel like I'm not getting on everyone else's nerves.' (Female, workshop 7)

'I find part of the reason it's so hard to get motivated is because it feels like a summer holiday, because you're not in a work environment.' (Female, workshop 7)

'It just feels like I'm at home instead of at uni.' (Female, workshop 7)

'I think I miss the routine that me and my housemates had, because we get up in the morning every day and go to the library together, and we'd be working in the library but we'd meet up and have a coffee, and it just broke up the day.' (Female, workshop 7)

Some students were positive about the university's response to the crisis:

'All the department have been so supportive. And the emails we've been getting from the department have been so lovely, and just trying to support us in whatever way that they can. And "If you want to speak to us, you can, we can organise a Skype or anything like that." So yes, I think the uni has been really good.' (Female, workshop 7)

The national lockdown imposed by the government in response to COVID-19 seriously affected students' experiences of university

life. Students expressed the importance of having plenty of dedicated study spaces across campus; these were sorely missed when they were forced either to return to the family home or remain working in their rooms in student accommodation. But students responded favourably to supportive and encouraging communication from staff at the university who directly oversaw their education at a departmental level as opposed to some of the relatively impersonal communications sent to the whole university. Although how information is experienced and processed may not seem to be an urgent priority when a rapidly changing public health crisis requires urgent communication, this is of vital importance in encouraging students to engage more fully both with the substance of what is being communicated and with the institution that is communicating it.

This point has wide-reaching implications both for students' sense of belonging and for how they respond to the University's expectations for behavioural changes which might feel counter to their own emotional welfare. If the University expects students to make serious relational sacrifices in the course of arresting viral transmission, it has to put significant scaffolding in place to allow them to do so without further adversity and harm.

Future engagements with student loneliness and mental health also have to factor in how the pandemic has been experienced, both by students at the University and by those who are yet to become students. Poor relational health can have an attritional effect, with extensive consequences for self-perception around relationships and socialising. Alongside the unequal burden of the pandemic on marginalised groups, this results in a context where the 'usual' challenges of, and anxieties associated with, making friends are heightened, and where the barriers to belonging and healthy identity formation imposed by structural health and social inequalities are further amplified.



## Recommendations

The following twelve recommendations are based on the findings from the pre-COVID workshops and are in response to longer-term factors contributing to students' sense of loneliness on University of Exeter campuses.

- Create and distribute among students (possibly via the Student Guild) a list of approved Exeter-based civic and community societies and opportunities for student involvement – organisations that could facilitate volunteering, rather than a list of opportunities themselves.
- Relieve pressure on first-year students to find second-year accommodation quickly. One way to do so is by liaising with the Studentpad portal to advise landlords not to advertise undergraduate student accommodation until Christmas each year.
- Consider providing university-wide communications through Departments (or Colleges), to foster greater connection between students and their direct educational facilitators.
- Provide clarity to students in halls of residence about how they may personalise their rooms and, where possible, provide students at move-in with a 'Hack Your Halls' box, containing 'items to safely decorate and personalise the space, perhaps a "Do Disturb" door sign when people are feeling social, wayfinding to mental health services, ability to set up floor or building WhatsApp groups and other items'. The 'Hack Your Halls' initiative was pioneered by the Loneliness Lab with London College of Communication students.
- Continue to ensure student safety by maintaining adequate lighting on all areas of the campus where footpaths intersect large amounts of foliage/shrubbery and by offering better signage to walking routes around campus.
- Consider adding more low-maintenance indoor plants to study spaces on campus so that students feel more connected to nature while working.
- Further involve students in the creation of student marketing materials, to represent the University as students experience it.
- Ensure that welcome days and contact with personal tutors and year tutors include a focus on mental health and social connection, involving not only discussions around what might help students in that cohort connect, but also encouraging them to feel responsible for each other's inclusion.
- Provide training on mental health and community formation to Welfare reps of student societies, and as part of their role prioritise inclusion and creating a welcoming environment for new members.
- Establish a Student Prospectus Committee, for students to offer timely feedback on the content of university marketing material (especially related to wording regarding the 'student experience'), to foster a more realistic and accurate representation of life at Exeter, including some of the challenges.
- Support the formation and embedding of a student lived experience group to advise on university policy on health, welfare, and wellbeing.
- Ensure that building social connections is not a luxury but core to what students do as they learn, for example by using more collaborative learning techniques. To achieve this, the University might need to provide some training, or make resources available to staff about how to embed social connection in teaching.

## Conclusion

This report has demonstrated that student loneliness is associated with identity development and a desire to be authentic, with students' relationship to the built environment and accommodation, and with their sense of connection to the local community. These factors are sector-wide, rather than Exeter-specific, concerns. The recommendations of this report focus on specific actions that would provide ongoing support for students to combat feelings of loneliness.

As a qualitative research study, the report has highlighted the value in learning from student voices directly and a more permanent means of eliciting student voices in shaping university policy around loneliness would be deeply beneficial. It would be useful, for example, to revisit these recommendations annually and, with student input, to revise them according to changing needs. Creating dedicated staff capacity to oversee this is advisable, particularly if this responsibility was integrated into standard Education & Research (E&R) roles, or E&R roles specifically designed to integrate research on student loneliness with other research and teaching. Co-producing initiatives with students

should become an institutional norm, with structures in place to support students with lived experience to engage significantly with university policymaking.

As the HE sector increasingly builds Equality, Diversity and Inclusion into its education and research practices, further research on student loneliness at Exeter would benefit from dedicated attention to people of colour, international students, mature students, and LGBTQIA+ students who already experience 'minority stressors' (Meyer, 2003).

It would also be desirable to study the similarities and differences in experiences of loneliness across student transitions at university, throughout the undergraduate lifecycle, taught and research postgraduate, but also among early career academics (broadly interpreted) on precarious contracts.

It would be useful for the University to know whether there are key concerns that are shared by all groups that the University could consider as it seeks to make its campus a more stable, secure, and less lonely place for everyone.





## Further Reading

Bhaiyat, A. et al. (2018) 'Why am I so lonely: Exploring factors affecting loneliness among LSE students'. Accessed online: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Teaching-and-Learning-Centre/Assets/Documents/GROUPS-papers/GROUPS-2018/GROUPS-2018-Group-5-research-paper.pdf> (October 8, 2021)

Cutrona, C. E. (1982) 'Transition to college: Loneliness and the process of social adjustment'. In L.A. Peplau, D. Perlman (Eds.), *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy* (Wiley: New York), pp. 291-309.

Hinchliffe, S., Jackson, M., Wyatt, K., et al. (2018) 'Healthy publics: enabling cultures and environments for health'. *Palgrave Communications*, 4. Accessed online: 10.1057/s41599-018-0113-9 (October 8, 2021)

Holt-Lunstad, J. et al. (2015) 'Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review'. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, pp. 227-237. 10.1177/1745691614568352

Kelly, J. et al. (2007) 'Strategies for student transition to college: A proactive approach'. *College Student Journal*, 41, pp. 1021-1035.

Luhmann, M. and Hawkley, L. C. (2016) 'Age differences in loneliness from late adolescence to oldest old age'. *Developmental Psychology*, 52, pp. 943-959. 10.1037/dev0000117

Meyer, I. H. (2003) 'Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence'. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, pp. 674-697. 10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674

McIntyre, J. C. et al. (2018) 'Academic and non-academic predictors of student psychological distress: The role of social identity and loneliness'. *Journal of Mental Health*, 27, pp. 230-239.

Özdemir, U. and Tuncay, T. (2008) U. 'Correlates of loneliness among university students'. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 2, p. 29. 10.1186/1753-2000-2-29

Pijpers, J. (2017) 'Loneliness Among Students in Higher Education: Influencing Factors'. Accessed online: [https://www.huisartsenamsterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Loneliness\\_Among\\_Students\\_in\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Influencing\\_Factors.pdf](https://www.huisartsenamsterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Loneliness_Among_Students_in_Higher_Education_Influencing_Factors.pdf) (October 8, 2021)

Ponzetti, J. J. (1990) 'Loneliness among college students'. *Family Relations*, 39, pp. 336-340. 10.2307/584881

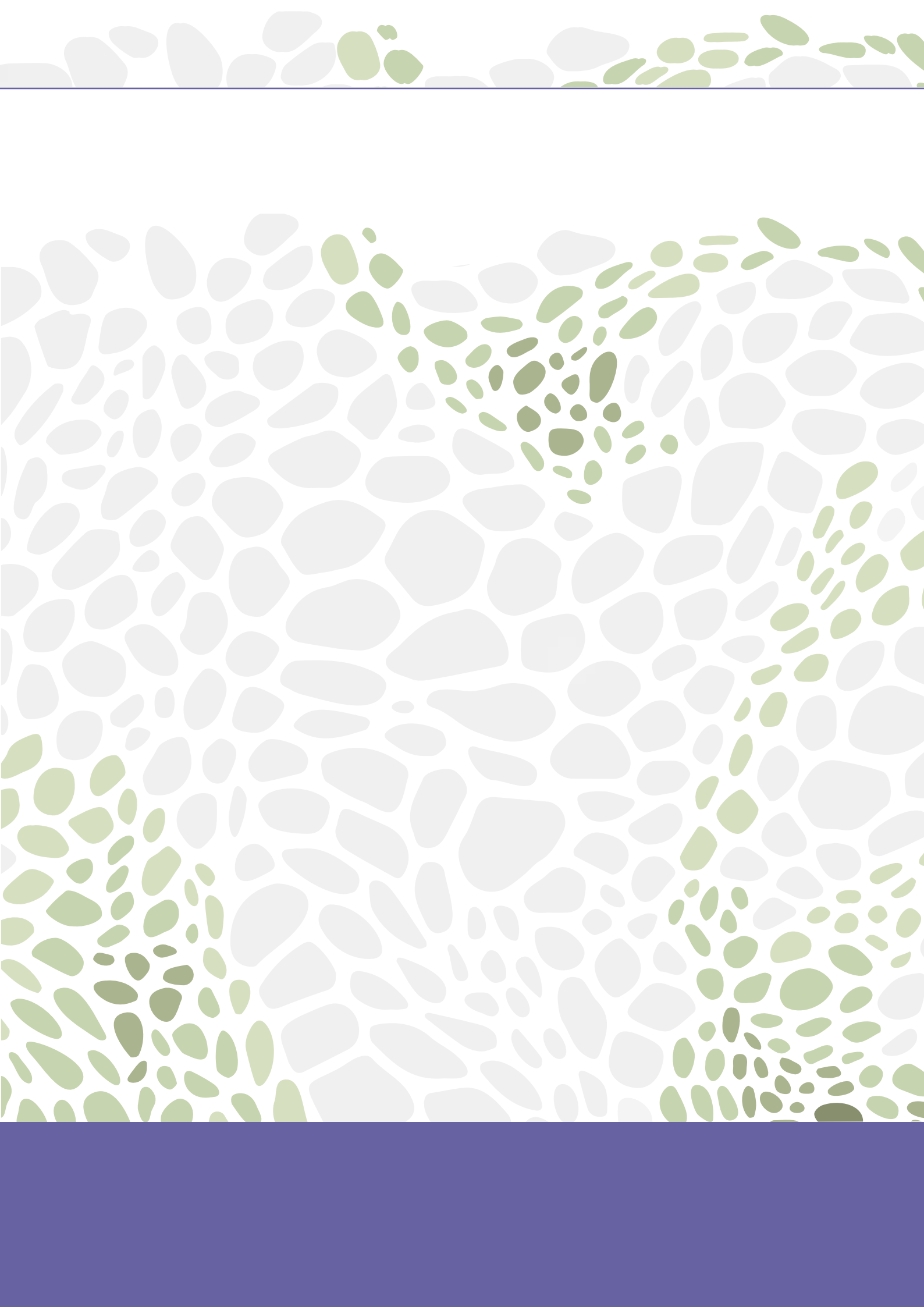
Qualter, P. et al. (2015) 'Loneliness across the life span'. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, pp. 250-264. 10.1177/1745691615568999

Richardson, T. et al. (2017) 'Relationship between loneliness and mental health in students'. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 16, pp. 48-54. 10.1108/JPMH-03-2016-0013

Rokach, A. (1990) 'Surviving and coping with loneliness'. *The Journal of Psychology*, 124, pp. 39-54. 10.1080/00223980.1990.10543204

Vasileiou, K. et al. (2019). 'Coping with loneliness at University: A qualitative interview study with students in the UK.' *Mental Health & Prevention*, 13, pp. 21-30. 10.1016/j.mhp.2018.11.002

Wohn, D. Y. and LaRose, R. (2014) 'Effects of loneliness and differential usage of Facebook on college adjustment of first-year students'. *Computers & Education*, 76, pp. 158-167. 10.1016/j.compedu.2014.03.018





## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the University of Exeter Provost's Fund and the Wellcome Trust for their generous support of this project.

## Contacts

Dr Richard Vytنيorgu: [r.r.o.vytنيorgu@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:r.r.o.vytنيorgu@exeter.ac.uk)

Dr Fred Cooper: [f.cooper@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:f.cooper@exeter.ac.uk)

Dr Charlotte Jones: [charlotte.jones@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:charlotte.jones@exeter.ac.uk)

Professor Manuela Barreto: [m.barreto@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:m.barreto@exeter.ac.uk)

Professor Mark Jackson: [m.a.jackson@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:m.a.jackson@exeter.ac.uk)

