TOWARDS A STUDENT LONELINESS STRATEGY

Recommendations for tackling student loneliness within the University of Cambridge.

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Introduction

Recent research on loneliness has tended to focus on elderly people and their experiences of social isolation in old age, with less attention given to how similar issues manifest themselves among younger generations.

Yet in 2018, a report by the Office for National Statistics found that nearly 10% of young people aged 16-24 said they often or always felt lonely.[1] Of this group, 18 to 21 year-olds exhibited the highest levels of loneliness. This was followed up by a Wonkhe report on student loneliness in 2019, which suggested nearly half of UK students felt lonely on a daily or weekly basis.[2]

It has become increasingly clear that student loneliness is a real issue across the Higher Education sector, and sadly Cambridge is no exception. Having put student loneliness at the heart of my campaign to be elected CUSU President in 2019, I was amazed by the number of students who came up to me during the course of the campaign and said how great it was to see loneliness on the political agenda. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who struggle most with feelings of loneliness and isolation are the ones whose voices are not always heard.

The findings of the *CUSU Student Loneliness Report* make for difficult reading.[3] 75% of respondents reported feeling lonely on a daily or weekly basis. Disabled students, working-class students and BME students all reported higher levels of loneliness in comparison to their peers. More than 1 in 10 said they had no true friends at university. The need for action could not be clearer.

While the issue of student loneliness is clearly not unique to Cambridge, there are unique challenges posed by the Cambridge environment. Overcoming these challenges is a task which requires carefully targeted solutions and a willingness to effect structural, as well as cultural, change. This phenomenon is most obvious in terms of student workload and the impact this has on student loneliness in Cambridge.

The impact of COVID-19, lockdown and the likely need for continued social distancing only serves to underline the importance of tackling student loneliness within Cambridge. Many of us will have experienced first-hand how a lack of meaningful social interactions can dramatically change our day-to-day lives and significantly impact our mental health as a result. The Office for National Statistics has already highlighted the problem of 'lockdown loneliness' among young people.[4] Given the challenges posed by this pandemic, it is more

important than ever that we are proactive in our efforts to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation among Cambridge students.

At the same time, we should also recognise the opportunities presented by COVID-19. The last four months have brought about unprecedented levels of change in the way the University operates and challenged some of the existing orthodoxies around education and student support in Cambridge. As we look towards the future and plan for a post-Covid world, we should take time to consider whether a return to the old way of doing things is necessarily desirable. While some of the recommendations contained within this report require a more radical restructuring of the University's approach to education, there has never been a better time to embrace this sort of change.

This report is split into three main sections. The first two sections consider how we define loneliness as a concept and present an overview of student loneliness in Cambridge, drawing on the findings of my previous *CUSU Student Loneliness Report*. The third section sets out the four central pillars of a strategy for tackling student loneliness within Cambridge, identifying key recommendations within each pillar.

As work to develop the University's Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy continues, it is clear that tackling student loneliness is vital for improving student mental health and wellbeing more generally. The recommendations contained within this report provide a clear plan of action for tackling student loneliness and it is my hope that they can be taken forward by the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Project Board and other relevant committees for further development and implementation.

While a difficult task, it has been incredibly rewarding to carry out this important piece of work and I am very grateful for all of the assistance I have received. In particular, I would like to express my thanks to Christy McMorrow, Grace Anderson, Chad Allen and Niall Campbell for their help and support.

I hope that this report will serve as statement of intent for tackling student loneliness within Cambridge and enable concrete action to be taken to address this crucial issue.

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CUSU President 2019-20

Defining Student Loneliness

In order to understand how we can tackle student loneliness within Cambridge, it is important to provide some clarity by defining this concept.

For the purposes of this report, loneliness is defined as:

"A feeling of being unhappy because of a lack of meaningful social interactions"

This definition captures several important aspects of loneliness that bear further consideration.

Firstly, loneliness must be understood as a feeling, and inherently subjective as a result. It is not possible to determine with any certainty whether an individual is lonely or not on the basis of external measures (e.g. number of friends) and identifying loneliness relies primarily on an individual's own self-assessment.

Loneliness should also be understood as a feeling of unhappiness, and therefore an unwanted experience. An individual cannot be described as lonely if a lack of meaningful social interactions is not impacting on their general happiness.

While cruder definitions of loneliness attribute feelings of unhappiness to a 'lack of friends', it is more useful to understand loneliness as the result of a lack of meaningful social interactions. It is these interactions that prevent individuals from feeling lonely, rather than the simple existence of friends. People with a large number of friends may still feel lonely on a regular basis if they are deprived of meaningful social interactions for one reason or another.

Crucially, the experience of these social interactions determines whether an individual feels lonely or not. If social interactions do not feel meaningful for the individual concerned, feelings of loneliness may still develop. Social interactions in and of themselves are not sufficient for preventing feelings of loneliness; they must be the right type and with the right people.
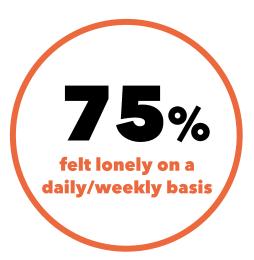
Student Loneliness in Cambridge

The findings of the *CUSU Student Loneliness Report* provide useful context for understanding the issue of student loneliness within Cambridge, drawing on data from a University-wide survey of over 1600 students.

Key Findings

According to the report, 75% of respondents reported feeling lonely on a daily or weekly basis.[5]

BME students, disabled students, working-class students and care-experienced students all indicated higher levels of loneliness in comparison to the wider student body. These groups tend to be underrepresented within the student population or face certain disadvantages within their educational experience.

75%

felt lonely on a daily/weekly basis

Despite high levels of loneliness across the board, two-thirds of respondents agreed that they had people they could call on if they wanted company or to socialise and over half indicated that they had some sort of friendship group at university. While a significant minority (15%) did not consider themselves to have any true friends at university, it is clear that a lack of friends is not necessarily the root cause of loneliness for many students in Cambridge.
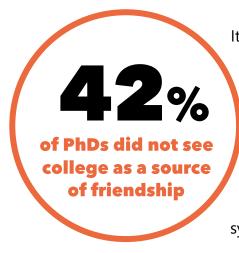
Key Factors

The evidence from the *CUSU Student Loneliness Report* points toward three main contributing factors to student loneliness within Cambridge, namely:

- A lack of opportunities for socialising.
- A lack of time for socialising and intense student workloads.
- The underrepresentation of certain groups of students within Cambridge and disadvantages faced (e.g. BME students, working-class students, disabled students)

Opportunities for Socialising

There is a clear need to provide more opportunities for socialising, particularly for the 15% of students who reported not having any true friends at university. While extra-curricular activities such as clubs, societies and sports were an important source of friendship for most students who participated in them, 18% of respondents indicated that they did not take part in any activities outside of their degree.

42%

of PhDs did not see college as a source of friendship

It is also important to recognise how traditional sources of friendship differ between students, depending on their level of study and subject. While 65% of respondents felt that people from their college were a source of friendship, just 38% of PhD respondents agreed with this statement, with 42% disagreeing. Some undergraduate students also indicated how a lack of opportunities to meet people outside of their college contributed to a sense of being shut out or excluded, highlighting the limitations of the collegiate system in providing opportunities for socialising.
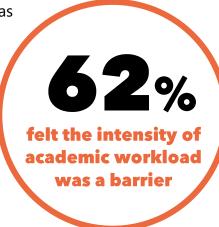
Similarly, while postgraduate students tended to see their faculty/department as a source of friendship, undergraduates were much less likely to do so. Many undergraduate students highlighted a lack of interaction opportunities within their course as a contributing factor to student loneliness. In particular, undergraduate students in arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) Triposes with larger cohorts, such as English, HSPS and Law, were significantly less likely to identify people in their faculty or department as a source of friendship. At the opposite end of the scale, undergraduate students studying Medicine or Veterinary Medicine overwhelmingly agreed that people in their faculty/department were a source of friendship for them.

Students also highlighted a lack of opportunities to make friends outside of Freshers' Week as a contributing factor to high levels of student loneliness, as well as the particular challenges facing PhD students arriving in Lent Term and Master's students studying nine-month courses.

Time for Socialising and Student Workload

The *CUSU Student Loneliness Report* identified academic workload as a key contributing factor to student loneliness in Cambridge, with 62% of students agreeing that the intensity of the academic workload in Cambridge was a barrier to making friends and having a healthy social life.

62%

felt the intensity of academic workload was a barrier

Survey responses indicated that the pressures of work being constantly set restrict people's ability to take time off and socialise. Students reported that lectures, supervisions and deadlines on Saturdays and Sundays prevented them from feeling able to take the weekend off to relax and make plans.

Underrepresentation and Disadvantage

Significant numbers of respondents from underrepresented groups of students felt that their identity/background had prevented them from forming friendships at university, including Asian/Asian British students (47%), Black/Black British students (46%), care-experienced students (47%) and working-class students (34%). The underrepresentation of certain groups appears to be a significant factor in the higher levels of loneliness experienced by these students.

The disadvantages faced by certain groups of students were also highlighted in survey responses as contributing factors to student loneliness within Cambridge. Several students highlighted money as a barrier to socialising with their peers, as well as accessibility issues faced by disabled students.

Towards a Student Loneliness Strategy

The next section of this report sets out the four central pillars of a student loneliness strategy, with accompanying recommendations, drawing on evidence from the *CUSU Student Loneliness Report* and discussions at the *CUSU Student Loneliness Forum* hosted in June 2020.[i]

1. Improving systems for identifying and measuring student loneliness.

One of the biggest challenges faced in tackling student loneliness is identifying students who are struggling with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Loneliness can often be a 'hidden issue' that is hard to spot. Students who identify as having 'no true friends' at university may find it difficult to disclose that they are struggling to make social connections. At the same time, it may not initially be obvious when students are experiencing regular feelings of loneliness, particularly among those reporting having some sort of friendship group.

Discussions at the Student Loneliness Forum emphasised the important role the tutorial system has to play in identifying students who might be struggling with loneliness. A strong relationship with their tutor is crucial in helping students to feel comfortable disclosing feelings of loneliness.

However, participants also noted the variation in tutorial support both within and between colleges. In some colleges, students will only have one or two meetings with their tutor over the course of an entire academic year. Some tutors may also have benefited from more training than others and have a better understanding of how to approach these issues as a result. Without greater consistency in tutorial support across colleges, it is difficult to prescribe approaches that have wide applicability.

As well as creating an environment in which students are able to disclose the problems they might be facing, tutors also need to feel confident in facilitating the sorts of conversations that can help uncover hidden issues like student loneliness. This will require the development of central resources that can be made available to tutors and a more consistent approach to training across the Collegiate University.

In instances where students are struggling with feelings of loneliness, tutors need to be equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge to support students in addressing these issues. Professor Martin Webber's 'Connecting People' framework provides a useful

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[i] The CUSU Student Loneliness Forum brought together a wide cross-section of people from across the Collegiate University, including students and staff, to discuss the findings of the CUSU Student Loneliness Report and consider some of the key issues highlighted. These discussions helped produce a number of excellent ideas and policy suggestions.

example of an approach tutors might adopt - identifying contributing factors and potential barriers, developing possible solutions and reviewing progress over time.[6]

Removing the potential stigma associated with feelings of loneliness can also help to create a culture in which students feel more able to seek help. The impact of COVID-19 and shared experiences of lockdown may have a positive impact in this regard, helping to 'mainstream loneliness' among the general population. Within a university context, induction talks and activities could be adapted to help normalise feelings of loneliness and encourage students to seek support if they are struggling. However, it is vital that this approach is accompanied by appropriate mechanisms of support within the tutorial system.

Developing a system of measuring loneliness among Cambridge students over time will also be crucial in assessing the impact of efforts to reduce student loneliness. While the *CUSU Student Loneliness Report* provides a useful starting point for understanding this issue, more accurate systems of measuring could be developed and replicated over a longer period of time in order to collect better data and enable some form of benchmarking. However, it is worth noting that the coming academic year would potentially produce quite a high benchmark, given the impact of COVID-19 and social distancing.

Recommendations:

1A: Ensure all students have regular, scheduled meetings with a designated tutor in their college. There is a clear need for more consistent provision of tutorial support across colleges. Regular meetings between students and tutors are vital for developing a trusting relationship and enabling students to raise pastoral issues, such as feelings of loneliness and isolation. Ideally, tutorial meetings would take place at least once a term in every college.

1B: Ensure all tutors are equipped with the necessary training and support to identify and address feelings of loneliness among students. Tutor meetings are often short - providing a framework for all tutors to help them in 'uncovering' loneliness or other pastoral issues and develop potential solutions with students can help make the most of this time.

1C: Develop a central framework for measuring student loneliness across the Collegiate University. This could be integrated into a broader annual mental health survey, developed in collaboration with the Students' Union and Colleges.

2. Improving opportunities for socialising for all students.

There is a clear need to provide more opportunities for socialising for all students, with particular attention to the needs of different groups of students. All parts of the Collegiate University have a crucial role to play in helping to create these opportunities, from Colleges to Faculties and Departments to the Students' Union.

In comparison to other universities, Cambridge offers very little in terms of social opportunities at the Faculty/Department level. This can make it difficult for undergraduate students to meet others on their course, particularly in subjects with large cohorts and limited small group teaching. Many courses do not currently organise any form of social induction events for students, limiting students' opportunities to make friends from different Colleges who are studying the same subject. In some subjects, such as Medicine and Law, student-led societies help create a sense of community within the Faculty/Department/School and organise events for students to meet each other outside of formal teaching hours. Finding appropriate resource, both in terms of finance and physical space, to replicate these sorts of initiatives in Faculties and Departments across the University might present a challenge, but it is one that deserves proper attention.

While Colleges are undoubtedly crucial in providing opportunities for socialising, it is clear that some students are more likely to slip through the cracks (e.g. PhD students who begin their studies later in the academic year and may not benefit from the usual schedule of induction activities). Given the important role played by MCRs in creating a sense of community among postgraduate students and providing opportunities for socialising, Colleges with less active MCRs should give consideration as to how best they can support them to perform this role.

A greater focus on cross-college interactions would also help address some of the problems student face in feeling 'frozen out' from establish friendship groups within College and JCRs/MCRs are very well-placed to help facilitate these sorts of events and connections. The provision of more opportunities for socialising in Colleges beyond Freshers' Week would also help address these issues.

Clubs and societies already provide students with a huge range of opportunities for socialising, yet it is important that students are able to find accurate information about what is on offer. The Students' Union's new website and revamped clubs and societies directory should make it easier for students to access this information and enable clubs and societies to advertise their events to students with greater ease. Some students who are interested in joining a new club or society might be worried about attending events alone in the first instance. Consideration should be given to a University-wide buddy-matching scheme which could link up students with similar interests and encourage them to get involved in clubs and societies together. Students who were keen to join a club and society, but

perhaps had reservations about attending events alone, could sign up to this scheme and be matched with other students with similar interests.

Recommendations:

2A: Support Faculties and Departments to provide more social opportunities for students. Many students lack any opportunity to make friends within their Faculty or Department. Faculties and Departments should organise social induction events for new students and establish student-led societies that can organise events throughout the year.

2B: Provide more social opportunities for postgraduate students in Colleges. Colleges with less active MCRs should support them in organising more events and social opportunities for postgraduate students, providing them with more resources where necessary. The Students' Union can also help facilitate sharing of ideas and best-practice among MCRs.

2C: Facilitate more frequent cross-college interactions between students. JCRs and MCRs should work collaboratively to organise more cross-college events that enable students to make friends from other colleges. The Students' Union can play an important role in helping to encourage this.

2D: Establish a University-wide buddy-matching system for clubs and societies. The Students' Union should explore the possibility of a buddy-matching system which could link up students with similar interests and encourage them to get involved with new clubs and societies together.

3. Creating more time for socialising by rebalancing student workloads.

Unmanageable workloads are a major contributing factor to student loneliness in Cambridge, preventing students from having time for meaningful social interactions. Providing more opportunities for socialising will do little to reduce student loneliness if the issue of workload is not addressed.

In part, the problem is one of expectations. Currently, undergraduate students can be expected to work up to 48 hours per week by their Faculty/Department, inclusive of scheduled contact hours. This extremely high ceiling contributes to a 'work 'til you drop' culture in some subjects and leaves students feeling obliged to sacrifice personal and extra-curricular commitments in favour of their academic work. Many students also appear to be working much more than this recommended maximum. A recent CUSU survey of 696 students found that 35% worked more than 50 hours per week. It is important that the maximum expected hours of academic work is set at a level that is realistic and enables students to spend time participating in other activities, particularly in first year.

More broadly, induction talks need to have a clear emphasis on the importance of a healthy work-life balance and students should be encouraged to make time for social activities. This message should be reiterated to students by Directors of Studies and Tutors throughout their time in Cambridge.

Yet while expectation setting can help solve some of these issues, wider structural changes are likely to be far more effective. A restructuring of the Cambridge term in line with Diagram A would help create more time for socialising and rebalance student workloads.

Diagram A: The current schedule of Michaelmas Term (Thursday-Friday, no reading week) compared with an alternative structure (Monday-Friday, reading week, Freshers' Week). Modelled on MT 2020.

This alternative structure would see teaching spread over the same nine-week period, but with weeks organised on a Monday-Friday basis and the inclusion of a reading week half-way through the term. A Freshers' Week could be included at the beginning of the term to provide incoming students with a full week's worth of inductions, enabling them to make

more social connections earlier on and easing the transition into university. The reading week would provide students with a break from the intensity of the Cambridge workload and an opportunity to focus on other non-academic pursuits and spend more time socialising. This week could also be used to offer study skills training and other forms of support to students, particularly for those in first year. 70% of respondents expressed support for a reading week in the CUSU survey referenced on Page 15. The Monday-Friday structure would encourage students to use the weekends for social and extra-curricular activities and send a clear message about the importance of a work-life balance. This structure would ensure that term did not intrude into the December interview period or significantly reduce the amount of time academics have to engage in research.

A reassessment of timetabling practices should also be considered, with a move away from teaching being scheduled on Wednesday afternoons and weekends. In line with the vast majority of other universities, Wednesday afternoons could be used by students to play sports or engage in other extra-curricular activities, providing more opportunities for social interactions. Removing teaching from weekends would also signal a clearer delineation of students' work-life balance. In a CUSU survey of 696 students, 59% indicated that they would support an end to teaching on Wednesday afternoons. Subjects that currently schedule teaching on Wednesday afternoons and weekends could consider reducing contact hours if necessary to accommodate these changes.

With the 2020-21 academic year likely to be substantially different in format to usual, there is a real opportunity to reassess how students are taught in Cambridge, rebalance workloads and create more time for socialising.

Recommendations:

3A: Restructure the Cambridge term to include a reading week and full Freshers' Week. The introduction of a reading week would reduce the pressure of students' academic workloads and provide them with more time for social activities, while the inclusion of a full Freshers' Week would ensure students have time to meet their peers at the beginning of term.

3B: Prevent teaching from being scheduled on Wednesday afternoons and weekends. Encouraging students to use Wednesday afternoons for sports and other extra-curricular activities would provide more opportunities for socialising. Weekends free from scheduled teaching would also help create a healthier work-life balance for students.

3C: Review the 48-hour work cap. Revisit guidance for Faculties and Departments on maximum expected work hours to ensure students have adequate time for socialising and extra-curricular activities. Collect data on average hours worked by students in order to monitor the effect of the cap.

3D: Emphasise the importance of a healthy work-life balance to students. Encourage Colleges and Faculties/Departments to communicate this in induction talks. Work with Directors of Studies and Tutors to ensure this message is consistently reinforced.

4. Addressing the needs of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

Students from the most underrepresented groups in Cambridge exhibit higher levels of loneliness than their peers and are more likely to feel that their identity/background has prevented them from making friends. This trend is unsurprising, given the lack of representation of many of these groups within the University, and it is likely exacerbated by the College system. Moving forward, it is vital that the University continues working to increase the number of BME, working-class, disabled and care-experienced students attending Cambridge.

Students from these groups should also be supported in efforts at community building within Cambridge. Many liberation officers on JCR and MCR committees do a fantastic job of organising events and social opportunities for disabled students and those from BME and working-class backgrounds, as do several societies within Cambridge. Colleges can help facilitate this work through providing funding and advice. The Students' Union's liberation campaigns also perform a similar function and engagement with these avenues should also be promoted more widely.

It is also crucial that the barriers some students face to current opportunities for socialising are addressed. Many disabled students struggle to engage with events and social opportunities in Cambridge as a result of accessibility issues. More wide-spread use of accessibility statements (providing information about the accessibility of an event and its venue) and avoiding venues which are not accessible for disabled students can help resolve some of these issues.

Low-income students may also face being excluded from certain social events as a result of financial barriers. The tendency for the Cambridge social calendar to revolve around very expensive events such as May Balls and Halfway Halls can be particularly challenging in this regard. Encouraging JCRs/MCRs, clubs and societies to avoid organising expensive social events in favour of cheaper alternatives can help address this imbalance. When these sorts of events do take place, discounted tickets for low-income students are useful in reducing these inequalities. This approach has been used to good effect by several May Balls and Halfway Hall events in recent years.

Recommendations:

4A: Support underrepresented groups with community building. Colleges should provide more funding and support for J/MCR liberation officers and relevant societies to organise events for underrepresented groups. The Students' Union should work to increase engagement with the SU Campaigns and ensure events are advertised widely, as well as encouraging all J/MCRs to include liberation officer roles on their committees.

4B: Ensure opportunities for socialising are made accessible. All events organised within the Collegiate University should publish accessibility statements and accessible venues should be used where possible. JCRs/MCRs, clubs and societies should be encouraged to avoid organising prohibitively expensive social events and provided discounted tickets for low-income students where necessary.

Summary of Recommendations

1A: Ensure all students have regular, scheduled meetings with a designated tutor in their college.

1B: Ensure all tutors are equipped with the necessary training and support to identify and address feelings of loneliness among students.

1C: Develop a central framework for measuring student loneliness across the Collegiate University.

2A: Support Faculties and Departments to provide more social opportunities for students.

2B: Provide more social opportunities for postgraduate students in Colleges.

2C: Facilitate more frequent cross-college interactions between students.

2D: Establish a University-wide buddy-matching system for clubs and societies.

3A: Restructure the Cambridge term to include a reading week and full Freshers' Week.

3B: Prevent teaching from being scheduled on Wednesday afternoons and weekends.

3C: Review the 48-hour work cap.

3D: Emphasise the importance of a healthy work-life balance to students.

4A: Support underrepresented groups with community building.

4B: Ensure opportunities for socialising are made accessible.

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