

Inclusion and Wellbeing in Higher Education: Addressing Loneliness among International Students in the UK and Japan

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Overview

- Loneliness as a societal issue
- Overview of the UK and Japan policies on loneliness
- Importance of addressing loneliness in international students
- **Objective:** better understand how and why international students experience loneliness in the UK and Japan
- Methods
- Findings
- Recommendations
- Project funding: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) KAKENHI Grant Number JP 23K18851

Inclusion and Wellbeing in Universities

- Common themes of **inclusion**: disability, neurodiversity, gender/LGBTQI+, race/ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status
- Loneliness is often sidelined or under-discussed
- Come to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic
- **Wellbeing** at universities has been narrowed to mental health
- Wellbeing is multidimensional, incl. social (connections, belonging/community), spiritual (connection to values/purpose), physical, emotional, cultural components

Loneliness Scholarship

- Loneliness contributes to mental and physical diseases, addictions, delinquency, dropout, and suicide (Hunley, 2010; Levesque, 2011; Janta, 2014; Jiang et al., 2018)
- Studied extensively in public health and psychology
- Implications: over-medicalisation & pathologising loneliness -> further stigmatisation, over-relying on medical and neglecting social solutions
- “Discrepancy between one’s desired and one’s actual relationships” (Jabalameili, 1993)
- Criticism: “catch-all term” (Helm, 2021, as cited in Vail, 2021)
- Transient vs. prolonged loneliness (Qualter et al., 2015)
- Objective (OSI) and perceived social isolation (PSI) (Okruszek et al., 2021)
- Differences across the life span (Barreto et al., 2021; Qualter et al., 2015)
- Individual (introversion, high sensitivity) vs. societal factors: social rigidity, discrimination, racism, othering, openness of host society to foreigners
- Social withdrawal: relationship to body image/appearance, health, finances

UK anti-loneliness policies



Jo Cox, MP
1974-2016



Tracey Crouch,
(b.1975)
1st 'minister for
loneliness', 17
January 2018 – 1
November 2018



Mims Davies
(b.1975)
2nd minister,
5 November 2018 –
25 July 2019



Stuart Andrew
(b.1971)
+ Minister for
Equalities
LGBTQ+ rights and
loneliness



Stephanie
Peacock
(b.1986)
'Minister for
loneliness' since
9 July 2024

Jo Cox Commission report on loneliness (December 2017) + annual reports

Focus on older people, later also rural areas

Key initiatives: Loneliness Awareness Week (LAW), Let's Talk Loneliness Campaign

Japan's anti-loneliness policies



- PM Suga creates the cabinet post
- Tetsushi Sakamoto (b.1950)
- 12 February 2021-4 October 2021



- PM Kishida's new cabinet
- Seiko Noda (b.1960)
- 4 October 2021-10 August 2022



- Masanobu Ogura (b.1981)
- 10 August 2022 – 13 September 2023



- Ayuko Kato (b.1979)
- 13 September 2023 – 2024



Junko Mihara (b.1964)
From 1 Oct.2024

Main areas: 1) older people and lonely death; 2) young women's suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic; 3) 'hikikomori' and 80-50 problem (media)
Delegated to local NPOs: suicide prevention, food banks, consultations for women

UK-Japan joint initiatives

- Online meetings, joint statements, information exchange
- First meeting of Loneliness Ministers, 17 June 2021, Tetsushi Sakamoto and Baroness Diana Barran
- Sakamoto: "We agreed that Japan and the UK should lead the world in combating loneliness" (TBS News, 2021)
- "Both countries will share data and information on how loneliness is affecting **their citizens**, their policy and measurement approaches" (Joint message, UK Gov, 2021)



Knowledge and policy gap and research objectives

- Anti-loneliness policies in the UK and Japan target citizens and neglect foreigners, incl. international students
- Loneliness as part of international student security (Marginson et al., 2010)
- International students at higher risk compared to domestic peers (Janta, 2014; Jiang et al., 2018; Wawera& McCamley, 2020; Neto, 2021)
- Lack of research on loneliness in migrant communities (Salway et al., 2010)
- **Research question:** "How and why do international students experience loneliness in countries with anti-loneliness policies?"
- Compare experiences of loneliness among international students in the UK and Japan
- Explore coping mechanisms and social support networks
- Highlight societal factors influencing loneliness

Migration and higher education policies

UK

Both attempt to resist higher levels of immigration as 'insular states' and prioritise highly skilled migration (Wakisaka & Cardwell, 2021)

- 14% of foreign-born population in 2021/2022 Census (Sturge, 2024)
- One of the world leading providers of international education
- Commercialised education: higher fees for international students
- Home country for the English language
- Hierarchy: the elite Russell Group universities and the rest

Japan

- 2.2% of foreigners, one of the lowest in the OECD (OECD, 2024)
- Less traditional study abroad destination
- Domestic fees and scholarships for international students
- English as a language of instruction but not for everyday communication
- Hierarchy of research-intensive and teaching-intensive universities

Methods of data collection

- Mixed methods study
- 1st phase: qualitative (semi-structured interviews with 24 international students, 12 in each country)
- Mid Feb – early July 2024
- 2nd phase: quantitative (online survey, n=91 in both countries)
- Late July – Dec 2024

	UK (n=12)		Japan (n=12)	
	Number		Number	
Educational programme				
Undergraduate	3		4	
Master's	4		1	
Doctoral	5		7	
Field of study				
STEM	0		4	
HASS	12		8	
University location				
	London (7)	Manchester (5)	Kanto (5)	Kansai (7)
Countries of origin	China (3), India (2), France (2), Egypt, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, USA		Indonesia (4), Iran (3), Egypt, Vietnam, Rwanda, Hungary, Uganda	
Age group				
20s	7		5	
30s	3		7	
Other	60s (1), 1 data n/a		0	
Gender				
Male	4		5	
Female	8		7	

1st Phase: Interview Findings

Organisational involvement

- **On-campus organisations**
- Japan: 7 participated, 2 dropped out, 3 never tried
- UK: 6 participated; 4 tried and dropped out; 2 never tried
- **Off-campus organisations**
- Japan: 7 participated, 2 dropped out, 3 never tried
- UK: considerably lower than in Japan: 3 participated; 1 tried and dropped out; 8 never tried

Interview Findings-2

• **Friendships**

- Japan: 3 local friends; 6 co-nationals, incl. 2 with only 1 friend + 1 friends only at home; 5 other international
- UK: 5 local friends; 5 co-nationals; 4 other international; 2 maintained home friendships; 1 supportive friend group in the host country
- Culturally different ways of making friends (Chinese F, London)

• **Intimate partnerships (romantic partner or spouse)**

- Japan: all 12 single without a partner
- UK: 8 single; 4 married or in a committed relationship

• **Family**

- Japan: all 12 reported supportive families
- UK: 6 close and supportive families; 5 less close to their family of origin; 1 data n/a

Loneliness Experiences

- “Interacting with the wrong people...that are not fulfilling your needs, contributes to more loneliness” (Indian F, Manchester)
- **Loneliness and weather** (Chinese F, UK)
- **‘PhD loneliness’**: solitary work, frustration about missing out on other aspects of life (Egyptian F, London)
- “Loneliness [in Japan] equals hikikomori” (Japanese M, London)
- “I feel completely isolated since I come to Japan. For two years I have felt isolated [...] I think mental issues don't really matter for any Japanese work environments or academic environments” (Iranian F, Kanto)
- **Severely lonely students** (few/dissatisfying connections, prolonged loneliness): 4 in Japan, 2 in the UK
 - **Popular coping strategies**: working out, journaling, study/writing groups, support from family, friends or therapy, taking care of others (e.g., of one’s sick parents, refugee children, end of life care)
 - **Unusual coping strategies**
 - a community of twin sisters
 - a new matching app for Asian students in the UK
 - parasocial relationships: online meetings with Japanese pop-music idols

Other Themes

- **Loneliness and religion**
- Important for 3 out of 24 interviewees
- Church as a source of belonging and a decision-making factor in personal mobility (Egyptian M, Coptic Christian, Kansai)
- French F, Muslim, UK: ostracised by the Muslim community in the UK because of not wearing a headscarf, common among unmarried young Muslim women in France
- **Loneliness and gender**
- Female interviewees reported more prolonged loneliness and objective isolation than their male counterparts
- Previous studies found men lonelier than women (Barreto et al., 2021)

Societal Factors

- Impact of **discrimination and racism**
- Physical attacks, verbal abuse, micro-aggressions, substandard treatment in restaurants: both UK & Japan
- Racial fetishisation of East Asian women in the UK (“yellow fetish”)
- Role of **host society openness and othering**
- **Cultural barriers:** understanding jokes, different ways of making friends in Western/non-Western cultures, generational, class differences in speech
- **Cultural enthusiasm** as a possible mitigating factor for loneliness
- (Perception of) **social rigidity:** lack of relational mobility
 - Several participants in the UK and Japan did not want to become friends with coworkers at part-time work because they had not chosen them

Interviews: Comparative Analysis

- More severely lonely interviewees in Japan (few and/or dissatisfying social connections, prolonged isolation)
- Considerably lower participation in off-campus groups in the UK
- Personal relationships (friendships and romantic partnerships) look better in the UK
- Possible explanation: students in the UK find it easier to form personal relationships -> reduces their need to participate in off-campus groups
- Alternative explanations: cultural preferences for more structured interactions in Japan vs. spontaneous or informal in the UK; differences in the university support systems; greater availability of off-campus groups in Japan

2nd Phase: Questionnaire

- 38 questions in the main part, 9 sections (1) Study Abroad/University/Wider Community, (2) Family, (3) Intimate relationships, (4) Friendships, (5) Accommodation, (6) Work and finances, (7) Language, (8) Positive/negative attitudes to solitude, (9) Physical and emotional wellbeing.
- 8 questions in the Demographic section, all optional
- Most questions borrowed from previous surveys & adapted for international students
- Some informed by interview themes (e.g., using descriptions instead of asking directly about discrimination; question on ‘threat perception’)

Survey Results: Loneliness & Discrimination

- Small sample (Japan: n=49, UK: n=42) did not provide significant results, but there was a slight trend
- **Mann-Whitney U test:** the mean rank of loneliness is slightly higher for those who experienced discrimination compared to those who did not (25.69 vs. 20.86 in Japan; 10 vs. 12.10 in the UK).
- **Spearman's Rho test:** very weak correlation between loneliness and discrimination, positive (0.096) in Japan and negative in the UK (-0.026)
- P-value ($p > 0.05$) in both tests: results are not statistically significant

Survey Results: Discrimination & Gender

- Hypothesis based on interview findings: There is an association between gender and experienced discrimination
- Discrimination as a latent construct with 8 items describing discrimination experiences
- **Chi-square & Fisher's Exact Test:** No significant difference between discrimination experiences among male and female students ($p > 0.05$). Observable trends, but small sample size limits significance.
- **Physical aggression:** More female students ($n = 8$) reported it than male students ($n = 1$) in Japan. Opposite in the UK: 2 male students
- **Feeling perceived as a threat:** More male students (Japan: $n = 6$, UK: $n=3$) reported this compared to female students (Japan: $n = 4$, UK: $n=1$).

Survey Results: Loneliness & Gender

- Mann-Whitney U test : The mean ranks are slightly higher for male students in both countries but the difference is very small
- Japan: male participants 25.45, and female 24.72
- UK: Male participants: 20.56, Female participants: 19.83
- A very mild trend toward male students reporting slightly more loneliness
- Not statistically significant

Survey Results: Loneliness & Withdrawal

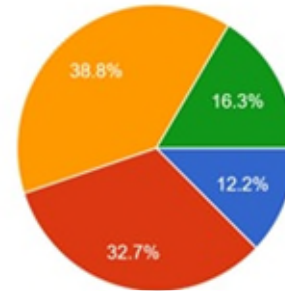
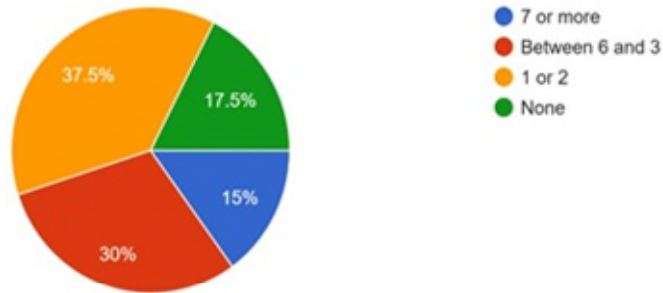
- **Mann-Whitney U test** : not statistically significant in both countries
- UK: large difference in mean ranks (31.33 vs. 19.62) but the sample has only 40 cases (37 in the low withdrawal group, 3 in the high group)
- Japan: insignificant differences in mean ranks (25.03 vs. 24.92)
- **Spearman's test:**
- UK: weak positive correlation ($\rho = 0.230$), not statistically significant ($p = 0.154$)
- Japan: similar results, $\rho = 0.223$, $p\text{-value} = 0.123$
- Possible reasons: different approaches, types of data, sample size
- Complexity of the relationship between loneliness and withdrawal

Survey Results: Shared Meals vs. Living Alone

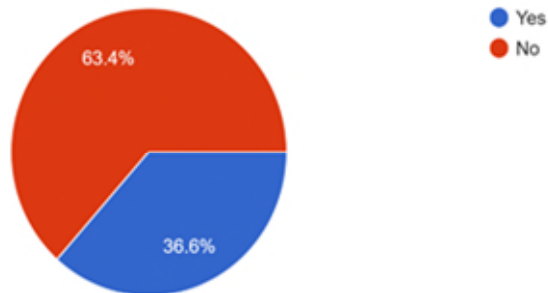
How many meals did you share with others last week?

UK (40 responses): None – 7 (17.5%), 1-2 – 15 (37.5%), 3-6 – 12 (30%), 7 or more – 6 (15%).

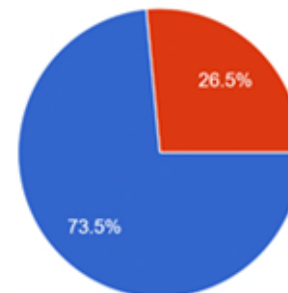
Japan (49 responses): None – 8 (16.3%), 1-2 – 19 (38.8%), 3-6 – 16 (32.7%), 7 or more – 6 (12.2%)



UK (41)



Japan (49)



Are currently living alone? - Yes/No.

Conclusion

- **Interviews:** male students in both countries reported worse experiences of racism and discrimination, physical and verbal abuse, while female students reported more loneliness
- **Survey:** no significant gender differences in loneliness and discrimination, slight trends between loneliness and discrimination, weak positive correlation between loneliness and withdrawal
- **Major limitation:** small sample sizes (low survey response rate)
- **Other limitations:** convenience sample, only HASS major students in the UK, disproportionate representation of certain nationalities in Japan
- **Further analysis planned:** Multivariate linear regression to assess relationships while controlling for other factors (e.g., age, education, country), analysing other variables, such as positive/negative attitude to solitude

Recommendations

- “I personally think that what helps new students, especially exchange students, to really get used to life in Japan and make friends is definitely the circles because clubs are really strict” (Iranian F, undergrad, Kanto) -> **more flexible on-campus groups**
- Expanding the orientation programme for later years, or splitting it into the introductory part for the 1st year and support for the later years (Egyptian F, PhD, London) -> **expanding support for the entire duration of the studies**
- Staying connected to your purpose (Japanese PhD, London) -> **workshops on building resilience through reconnecting to one’s purpose/meaning**
- Strengthening **anti-discrimination policies**
- **Avoiding overly direct anti-loneliness interventions** -> may cause lonely students to withdraw even further

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