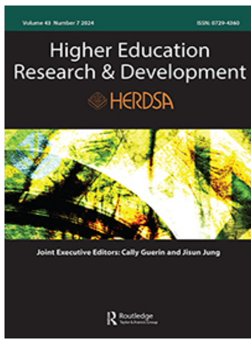

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Using historical approaches to understand contemporary student loneliness

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ABSTRACT

Student loneliness is a global problem, with universities struggling to tackle an issue that has important implications for student success, satisfaction, and mental health. This research uses archival material from the 1960s and 1970s alongside qualitative discussions with contemporary students to explore the ways that experiences of loneliness within British higher education have changed across recent decades. Such an approach bridges the divergent approaches taken by different scholarly disciplines, applying focus group methodologies to the consideration of archival material. For this project five focus groups were held with undergraduate students at four universities in England, Wales and Scotland. This article argues for the contemporary relevance of historical research into student loneliness, exploring student responses to their predecessors' experiences of loneliness. It argues that equipping undergraduates with a deeper knowledge about their forerunners' experiences of disconnection can trouble some of the stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations around the sociable 'student experience' today. Such an approach has widespread implications for researchers' and policy makers' understandings of the potential role of interdisciplinary and humanities-generated knowledge in addressing social problems within higher education.

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Introduction

Student mental health is a pressing issue in British universities, with loneliness coming to be seen as an important and related problem (Neves & Brown, 2022; Richardson et al., 2017; Vasileiou et al., 2019). While loneliness is by no means synonymous with mental illness it has been shown to be a predictor of mental distress in students (McIntyre et al., 2018). Moreover, research has shown that young people are particularly vulnerable to the harms of loneliness (Danneel et al., 2018, 2019). Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the charity Student Minds identified loneliness as one of the ten 'grand challenges' for higher education in Britain (Student Minds, 2014, p. 3), while more recent research has shown that the pandemic exacerbated student loneliness (Phillips et al., 2022). The

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challenge of tackling student loneliness is global in its scale: researchers in Australia, for example, have found that students consider *people* to be essential for fostering a sense of belonging at university (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Researchers have argued that 'taking steps to reduce the risk of student loneliness is of paramount importance within universities' (Thomas et al., 2020), and have highlighted the importance of 'authentic connections' in higher education (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). It is against this background of concern that universities have grappled with how to address student loneliness. Some have focused their efforts on destigmatisation (Loades et al., 2021; Young Minds and Laura, 2019), while others have explored the potential of promoting student wellbeing through enhanced social relationships (Priestley et al., 2022).

In its scoping work on the role of enhanced knowledge of past students' experiences for current students, this article examines a further, complementary way that student loneliness might be approached. It argues that while historical understanding cannot *fix* problems, it can provide new perspectives on the present. By highlighting the *endurance* of these problems, historical approaches can provide students with an interrogative lens on the contemporary construction of the 'normal' student experience.

The project worked with current students to explore their responses to historical accounts of undergraduate loneliness, looking particularly to material written during the 1960s and the 1970s. This period was chosen because of its importance in the development of British higher education. Perhaps most critically, it was a period of expansion of both student numbers and institutions. New universities were established – including seven in the four years between 1961 and 1965 – and university student numbers grew from 108,000 in 1960 to 228,000 a decade later (Perkin, 1972, p. 111). The composition as well as the size of the student body changed. In 1958 women represented 24 per cent of the university student population; by 1984 women comprised 40 per cent of the student population (Dyhouse, 2001, pp. 124–127). The class profile of the student body was slower to change. While the Robbins Report of 1963 urged 'places for students of all classes', working-class students continued to progress to universities in smaller numbers than their middle-class counterparts (Halsey et al., 1980, pp. 188–193). As Bethany White has observed, working-class female undergraduates comprised a yet smaller group of students (2019, p. 7). While in the 1960s and 1970s students of colour constituted a small minority, the intersecting problems of racism, social isolation, and mental distress – particularly as they affected international students – was noted by the National Union of Students (NUS) in the 1960s (Morris, 1967, p. 43). Importantly, too, ideas about student life, shaped by the growth of a distinctive youth culture and the 'permissive society', began to change. By looking back at student experiences in these decades we can trouble some of the ideas that shape student life today.

This article argues that student loneliness has a history; that in the 1960s and 1970s students grappled with their sense of connectedness; and that such struggles have resonances for undergraduates today. It first sets out the research methodology. It then draws on the archival material and students' responses to it, structured into four key themes derived from the focus groups themselves. It then sets out the key research findings and discusses the potential implications of contemporary students' responses to historical material about student loneliness.

Methodology

The methodology of this project was two-fold. First, archival sources were used to establish that student loneliness has a history. The researcher – a historian with a background in the social history of medicine and histories of student mental health (Crook, 2020, 2024) – examined material made digitally available and held in institutional archives by universities in Scotland (University of Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde) as well as England (the University of Bristol; the University of Warwick; the London School of Economics) and Wales (Swansea University). The researcher consulted historical student newspapers, student newsletters, student-produced ephemera, student union material, and university and course-level committee minutes. The archival material which gives insight into the student 'voice' is drawn upon in this article alongside analyses of university communities by postwar social scientists (for more on the historical context of this social science material see Crook, 2024).

[1] These sociological studies include Ferdynand Zweig's interviews with students at the universities of Oxford and Manchester (1963), Peter Marris' interviews with final year students at the universities of Southampton, Leeds, and Cambridge, and students at Northampton College of Advanced Technology (from here on 'Northampton College') (1964), and Joan Abbott's survey of students at Edinburgh, Durham and Newcastle in the early 1960s (1971). These materials were used to explore student experiences of loneliness and efforts to create, navigate and articulate university community during the 1960s and 1970s.

The second stage of this research involved hosting five focus groups with students at four institutions – two focus groups at Swansea University in Wales, one at the University of Sheffield, one at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) in England, and one at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. All focus groups were held in person, except the Sheffield group, which was, for reasons of travel, held on Zoom. The focus groups, which were promoted to students by lecturers and professional services staff within the institutions, were open to all registered students over the age of 18, regardless of subject, discipline, and level. However, in the end all participants were undergraduates, and all studied humanities or social science subjects. One contributor was a mature student, one student was a European international student spending a year at a British university, one student was an American student undertaking the entirety of their degree in Britain, and student contributors came from both white and minoritised backgrounds. All students, other than one (the European international student), had English as a first language. The average student group size was 3, and focus groups lasted for between 40 and 70 minutes. Students did not need to register in advance. Recordings were made via an app on the researcher's phone (or via Zoom). Following time for contributors to read and sign project consent forms, the first section of the focus groups involved the researcher giving a verbal summary of the research aims and a brief history of postwar higher education in order to give context to the archival material that was then introduced to the students. Contributors were subsequently given time to read one of two student-authored articles. In the final two focus groups (Strathclyde and QMUL) students were offered the opportunity to listen to the article via a pre-prepared recording, for those for whom audio-processing was preferable, although no students took this up.

The first of these articles, used in all the discussions (bar Sheffield) was written by undergraduate student Beryl Korman and published in Warwick's student newspaper, *Campus,* in May 1970. Korman's article discussed a survey of student loneliness conducted at the university and drew upon her own experiences to highlight the 'basic lack of human warmth' at the institution (Korman, 1970). The second article, used in the Sheffield group, was about student mental health more generally, and was published in student newspaper *Campus* in 1968 (Editorial comment, Campus, 1968, p. 2). Students at Sheffield were given this article to provide an alternative basis for the discussion of the themes. However, Korman's piece proved to be a more stimulating foundation for discussion, so was used in the subsequent two focus groups.

Discussion was prompted by pre-prepared, open-ended questions from the researcher. At the close of the focus group students were then asked if, and how, interaction with this archival material made them reflect upon the present. The recordings of the focus groups were subsequently transcribed and analysed, at which stage key themes were identified. Broader archival and historical materials – including the social science material – were then re-read with these themes in mind. The key themes that emerged from the focus groups were identity and sociability; the challenges of the first year; the need for depth and meaning within social interactions; architecture, space and accommodation. These themes structure the ensuing analysis.

Literatures and the history of loneliness

This article contributes to, and draws from, literature within history and research on higher education. There is a growing scholarly interest in the history of students (Sharp, 2022, p. 123). Although higher education as a whole has a rich historiography, this has not always centred students. Indeed, in the 1990s Harold Silver and Pamela Silver were able to reflect that a 'great deal of research that sounds as though it is about students is not about students at all' (1997, p. 2). More recently, though, this has begun to change (see, for example, Brewis, 2014, Burkett, 2018). Oral histories have, in particular, drawn to light the multiple roles that universities play within individual life stories. This was something that was reflected upon by contributors to this research: an undergraduate at Swansea differentiated between the 'university' experience and the 'uni' experience: *university*, she said, was the place you went to study, whereas *uni* was where you were 'going out partying, and making new friends, joining societies' (Swansea focus group 1).

As these multiplicities of experience suggest, then, student lives present historians with distinctive challenges. For example, student newspapers – as used in this article – cannot be seen to be representative of the views (or speaking for) of the whole student community, but rather as a partial, mutable forum for the expression of the views and experience of individuals whose articulations were shaped by and in turn shaped the expectations and norms of their community. Nonetheless, student-produced materials deepen our understanding of past student experiences by illuminating some of the issues seen to be of interest to their student audience. As this article shows, too, this material highlights the complex emotional world inhabited by students, underscoring a pattern of life marked not just by sociability and the expectation of connection but also by loneliness, disconnection and alienation.

It should be little surprise that in recent years historical scholarship on solitude, loneliness, and the fragile boundary between the two has flourished. As Julian Stern has recently argued, 'a person's life can be described in terms of the ebb and flow of togetherness' (Stern, 2021, p. 1). In recent years attention has been drawn to these ebbs. In her recent study Fay Bound Alberti considered the historical production, embodiment and meanings of loneliness, seeking to understand

> how loneliness, like other emotional states … might take on different meanings depending on context; how loneliness can be physical as well as mental; and how loneliness as an individual experience might be shaped by and reflect bigger social concerns that include gender, ethnicity, age, environment, religion, science, and even economics. (Bound Alberti, 2021, p. x)

The exact composition of loneliness, she says, 'varies according to the perception and experience of the individual, their circumstances and environment … loneliness can change over time depending on a range of cultural factors, expectations, and desires' (Bound Alberti, 2021, pp. 5–6). This is key to understanding *student* loneliness, which is commonly enmeshed not only with a life stage – the end of adolescence at the cusp of adulthood (one of the defining 'pinch-points', according to Bound Alberti) (2021, p. 10) – but also with the cultures, expectations and desires expressed within the social world of universities. As Bound Alberti observes, 'Loneliness in the young is no less a problem than loneliness in the aged, but it will necessarily manifest itself differently according to expectations, abilities, and environment' (2021, pp. 10–11). This article does not have the scope to consider in depth the ways that these three factors – expectations, abilities and environment – have shaped experiences of loneliness within British universities. It does, however, suggest that the 'lonely campus' (Vytniorgu et al., 2021) has deep roots; that the evidence of the history of the lonely campus is there if we look for it; and that this knowledge can serve a function for the modern student.

Conceptualising student loneliness and understanding the history of the lonely university is the subject of an ongoing Medical Research Council-funded interdisciplinary project (Byrom et al., 2022–2025). The historical research forthcoming from this project – led by this author – is shaped by Cooper and Jones's recent observation that 'student loneliness is a porous component of widespread experiences of mental ill-health at university', which is liable to decontextualisation and depoliticisation. Nonetheless, as Cooper and Jones argue, 'loneliness is presently the most recognisable language we have to articulate complicated and difficult feelings of isolation, estrangement, and abandonment' (2022, p. 5). That loneliness has gained such resonance as a 'recognisable language' is a relatively recent development, even if, as Barbara Taylor has said, 'the feelings we associate with loneliness have been described as far back as written records go' (Taylor, 2021). David Vincent has argued that the term 'loneliness' became familiar to the public in the nineteenth century (2021, pp. 20–21). Later, psychology welcomed the category; 'the diffuse concept of melancholy was reborn as a condition with interacting mental and physical symptoms' (Vincent, 2021, p. 21). Tracking these symptoms has not been easy. As both Vincent and Bound Alberti observe, attempts to measure loneliness are imperfect (Vincent, 2021, p. 232; Bound Alberti, 2021, pp. 5–6). Understanding loneliness remains a challenge: in March 2023 the UK government identified several evidence gaps around loneliness (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023). It is timely, then, to set out the benefits of cross-disciplinary studies of the theme.

Research on higher education provides a further literature with which this work engages. There have been productive interrogations of the impact of neoliberalism on the modern university – particularly neoliberalism's exaltation of individualism, consumerism, and marketisation (Brooks, 2022; Brooks & Abrahams, 2018; Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Della Porta et al., 2020; Morrison, 2017; Mintz, 2021; Nixon et al., 2018; Raaper, 2020; Tight, 2019). Here, too, historical research is instructive: James Vernon has identified the 1990s as the formative decade in the neoliberalisation of British higher education and has argued that it was 'a deeply messy, contingent, and uneven set of processes, set in motion by a variety of agents, discourses, and practices, [that] gradually recast the university as a neoliberal institution' (2018, pp. 268–269). There is not enough space to discuss in detail the multidisciplinary body of research on the neoliberalisation of the academy here, but it is worth noting that the processes of marketisation, consumerisation, privatisation, and financialisation have shaped the terrain that frames the focus group participants' discussion of their experiences.

Likewise, there has been important scholarly work on first year undergraduates' expectations, experiences, and outcomes (Bowman & Holmes, 2018; Maunder et al., 2013; McInnes, 2001), and, as noted in the introduction, on undergraduate and youth loneliness (Bache & Burns, 2021; Batsleer & Duggan, 2020; Bhaiyat et al., 2018; Oakley, 2020). The archival research conducted for this project suggests that there has long been an awareness that the first year of undergraduate study constitutes a particularly vulnerable moment for young people. Contemporary research into the first-year experience, then, is developing a field of interest that has roots in the postwar period.

Historical and contemporary student articulations of loneliness

Identity and sociability

Far from being a contemporary invention, the idea of a distinctive student 'identity' and the importance of involvement in the university community was underlined in British investigations of student life in the 1960s and 1970s. However, students have not universally nor uncritically adhered to this sociable model. In 1963 sociologist Ferdynand Zweig developed an 'image of the model student, of the student as he sees himself at his best, the image to which he aspires' (Zweig, 1963, p. 190). The model student 'must be sociable' Zweig wrote, for:

> The university is a way of life which every student has to share. Full participation and sharing in the cultural environment provided by the university is essential for his intellectual and social maturation. He must not only have the gift of sociability, but he also must use it constructively, mixing with people of the right kind who can lift him up and enrich his own life. He must feel as well as appear sociable. He must be sociable not only superficially but deep down, prepared not only to take but to give, out of the fullness of his heart and head. He should be extravert, true, but he should also find time to be with himself, to try to understand, to know, to analyse himself, to progress on the road to self-discovery. His sociability should not prevent him from enjoying his own company, the company of the self. (Zweig, 1963, p. 191)

For Zweig, student sociability was key to their growth and development, but needed to be counterbalanced with contented, productive solitude. Nonetheless, it was the model of

the *social* rather than solitary student that acquired cultural purchase. It is notable, then, that Zweig's own student contributors observed that they did not fit this sociable model. 'I don't make friends very easily. I am a lot by myself', said one student, while another reflected that 'I am afraid to meet new people, I don't know how to talk to them' (Zweig, 1963, p. 162). Fantasies of the sociable student have, then, always fallen short of capturing the diversity of social experiences. The sociable student image was underlined by undergraduate Beryl Korman in her newspaper article on loneliness at the University of Warwick in 1970. Korman observed that 'Loneliness does not fit into the general image of the student. And we all love to live up to our image' (1970, p. 5). The importance of *image* was an issue that contemporary students picked up on in focus group discussions of Korman's piece. One female student at QMUL commented that it was the discussion of image that stood out to her, and that expectations of the social student life emerged from the

> kind of media that's pushed, pushed towards being a student of, you know, partying every weekend, always being drunk, but also having like loads of friends and kind of always, you know, go into lectures and everything like that, and it just wasn't, that wasn't it … there was an expectation of uni is going to be amazing … And it's just kind of fallen a little bit short of that, I suppose. (QMUL focus group)

An international student also commented on the social expectations of student life, and observed the factors that impeded it

> everybody's like, Okay, you're going to go to a lot of parties … everything will be so easy in the in the classes and the lectures … . you have the idea of I'm going … to have a lot of fun. The lectures are not always easy. And it's struggling with the language also. And, and you feel lonely sometimes. (Strathclyde focus group)

The role of language in augmenting social isolation was observed by the NUS in the late-1960s (Morris, 1967, p. 42–43). That this current student commented on language underlines its enduring role in the loneliness of international students. The expectation that student life is distinctively social ('you're going to go to a lot of parties') seems to be shared among contemporary British and international students. However, as these students show, its ability to be realised is shaped by practical, structural, and personal circumstances.

Structural factors have long affected students' ability to fulfil the aspiration of the sociable student life. Researcher Joan Abbott observed in the 1970s that class shaped student experiences and was implicated in involvement in societies, residence, and personal relationships (Abbott, 1971). In the 1960s sociologist Peter Marris also noted the influence of class, schooling, and regional identity. For example, 1960s students discussed the ways that regional or classed accents could generate feelings of dislocation. 'I feel very awkward,' a Leeds student reported, 'It has developed more since I've come here – I don't feel comfortable whatever way I speak. My parents speak dialect, and I speak pseudo middle-class, and I don't feel comfortable speaking either way' (Marris, 1964, p. 96). While a source of social enrichment, Marris suggested, the social diversity of higher education was a source of 'conflict and anxiety' (1964, p. 101). Contemporary students also felt that identities shaped their ability to join groups. One female student at Swansea reflected on her aborted experience of trying to join a sports team, saying that 'I saw all the guys in there looking nice and fit, and I thought no … I just left' (Swansea

focus group 2). However, while communal activities emphasise social divisions, they are widely seen as an important means of insulating new students from loneliness.

First year experiences

The loneliness of first year students is an area of longstanding sociological and psychological interest. In her study, Abbott observed that 'some students are unutterably lonely, especially in first year when everything and everyone is strange' (Abbott, 1971, p. 314). The idea that first year was a particularly important point of social transition was borne out in Marris' 1960s study, which found that more students recalled that they were lonely upon arrival than at any other time (Marris, 1964, pp. 81–82). Efforts to build networks and communities among new students were not always without criticism, however. In 1969 the University of Warwick faced calls to end its Student Union-organised 'freshers' weekend' and to reorganise their induction to avoid what was accused of being a 'consistently disastrous programme of mass entertainment'. While some students might enjoy the weekend, the student newspaper conjectured, 'their enjoyment cannot possibly compensate for the extremes of depression and loneliness induced by the transparently false spontaneity of the 'The Greatest Show on Earth' (Waterman, Campus, 13 June 1969, p. 2). In the focus groups the archival material prompted students to reflect on the process of settling into university. A nondrinking student remembered that 'it was so hard for me … to make friends initially, because I didn't go to the socials. And I didn't go to clubs and things initially, because I didn't feel comfortable with it' (Swansea focus group 2). The archival material and the contemporary student indicates that a sense of discomfort with social events created a sense of disconnection.

Meaning and depth

Student loneliness, both in the 1960s and in our contemporary moment, was framed as a consequence of lack of *meaning and depth* to informal interactions. A student at QMUL recalled the repetitive, shallow nature of freshers' conversations, driven by curiosity around individual biographies. These interactions, she noted, were 'fleeting' and were 'not friends' (QMUL focus group). Student loneliness is not necessarily about a deficiency in the quantity of social connections, but about the quality of these interactions. In the 1960s a Cambridge student explained in Marris' study that he had a 'more fundamental kind of loneliness. I don't mean that I haven't got friends to go and see, call it more a consciousness of being alone … I think it's more general than just being alone at university, although before exams it becomes more acute!' (Marris, 1964, p. 81). Loneliness, then, was shaped by the rhythms and stresses of academic life, but also tapped into something more 'fundamental'. For a female Leeds student in the 1960s, loneliness was related to a sense of detachment and lack of empathy. 'Everyone gets lonely at some time or another', she explained, 'Mostly when I think how remote this society is from everyday life, and how selfish it is in many respects. Apart from one or two friends, you feel that most people don't care a damn … ' (Marris, 1964, pp. 81–82). Students at Northampton College – which had no student halls – also reported a lack meaningful contact with each other. One Northampton student recounted that 'Here I can go for a whole day with only comments on the weather to a few people' (Marris, 1964,

p. 107). Marris suggested that 'it was not that the Northampton students felt more isolated than students at university … But when they were depressed or harassed with overwork, the impersonal atmosphere of the college routine did nothing to restore their spirits' (Marris, 1964, p. 108). In 1970, Korman underlined the importance of meaningful friendships and connections: fleeting or superficial interactions exacerbated loneliness, she observed (Korman, 1970).

University spaces and accommodation

According to both Korman and contemporary students, a lack of student community was represented by withdrawal from university spaces outside teaching hours. Korman worried about the 'weekend exodus' which 'exemplified' the 'lack of community' at Warwick (1970). Students who lived off campus were felt to be still less engaged with university life in the 1960s and 1970s. These students had a 'tendency to come in in the mornings, have a meal, use the library and then return home each evening, having little real contact with other students, and really missing out on the social life', Korman wrote (1970). Students at Glasgow shared these concerns about non-residential life. In January 1976 the *Glasgow University Guardian* worried that loneliness was exasperated by the nature of the university: 'so many students come here on a nine to five basis and it therefore lacks any sense of being a community' (*Glasgow University Guardian,* 29 January 1976, p. 3). The following month the newspaper returned to the theme of loneliness, arguing that

> If there was a genuine wish to belong to the campus community, then most of the students, now adrift, would probably feel able to participate, make friends and enjoy studying and socialising. At the moment the criticism that this place is an anonymous 9–5 degree factory has some validity. (McHaffie*, Glasgow University Guardian*, 1976)

Sociological surveys asserted the problems associated with off-campus living. 'Lodging in a strange city, miles away from the university centre, amongst thousands of other students, each preoccupied with his own affairs, seems a desolate introduction to any community', Marris observed (1964, p. 81). A student at QMUL was prompted by Korman's article to reflect that 'the point about off-campus students having a lost sense of belonging is truer than ever. While I live on campus, the physical distinctions between off-campus students act as an invisible barrier' (student exhibition). In focus groups, contemporary students differed in their understandings of the weekend 'exodus' from campus. While some students understood their peers' need to 'decompress', other students said it 'feels like this isn't your proper life, in a way' and 'temporary, you're never fully in kind of one place' or that by going home students were not getting the 'full experience' (Swansea focus group 2). The 'full experience' seems to involve a full-time immersion in university life.

On the other hand, student halls were, and are, sites of alienation and loneliness. In 1968 Warwick's newspaper, *Campus*, complained that the halls of residence were 'impersonal, noisy … depressing'. The most recently erected block, the student newspaper said, had an atmosphere of 'prison-like isolation, of loneliness, of depression; in fact, one in which the building overshadows its human occupants.' The 'whole tone of the halls is wrong', for the architects, it claimed, had 'forgotten that students are human' (Editorial 'Chicken Coops', Campus, 18 October 1968, p. 2). Two years later a *Campus* editorial

claimed that loneliness was 'the most serious social problem at this university'. Social spaces in halls should be provided, to 'humanize the cells of the residential blocks' (Editorial, Campus, 13 February 1970, p. 3). A contemporary student at QMUL also noted the effect of lack of social spaces in university accommodation, saying that her first year flat only had a 'cold' kitchen as the social space, meaning that students had 'no sort of community space' (QMUL focus group). In 1971, in another article about student halls, *Campus* noted that students housed in one particular hall 'frequently complained' about 'the problems of loneliness and of 'not belonging' (Sadler, Campus, 22 January 1971, p. 5). Contemporary students noted that student halls might bring students into proximity with one another, but rifts remained (QMUL focus group). Student accommodation has an important role to play in facilitating the immersion that students consider a part of the 'full experience', but the design of the buildings have been disparaged by multiple generations of students.

Student reflections on the implications of archival material

At the end of the focus groups students were asked to reflect upon their conversations and to consider the potential implications of the historical material. Their responses should be caveated in two ways: first, that participants in the focus groups were already, by the nature of freely giving up time to attend the focus groups, a self-selected group of unusually invested students; second, their affirmative responses to the material were no doubt shaped by the presence of the researcher. Those caveats notwithstanding, however, students shone new light on the resonances of the material, and the majority concluded that there was potential for knowledge of historical student loneliness to do *work* in the present – if not to address loneliness, then to provide a new platform for its exploration. Looking across the focus groups, we can see that students identified three key benefits of engagement with these archival materials: validation of their experiences; a shift to seeing loneliness as endemic and institutional; a platform for the consideration of their agency and their role in the creation of community.

The students argued that one element of the work that the historical knowledge could do was around the validation of their emotions. As one student at Sheffield reflected, there was 'an element of solidarity and comfort on an individual level in knowing that students have suffered from these struggles for decades before the term 'snowflake' was thrown around'. Another student, from the same institution, wrote that understandings of past student experiences were 'personally validating' (student exhibition). A student at Swansea reiterated this point, reflecting that the history of student loneliness was a reminder that 'our feelings are valid' (Swansea focus group 2). Another student at Swansea felt that discussing past student loneliness had the potential to 'help to change this idea of what a student, or what student life, must be' (Swansea focus group 1). Other students similarly reflected that the discussions encouraged them to consider the origins of ideas about university life. One Sheffield student commented that the 'point that these were standards and norms pre-existing the sometimes overly idealised social media world resonated with me too. I feel this is a testament to their power and deep-rootedness' (Sheffield focus group).

Importantly, students used the archival material to configure loneliness as an *institutional,* rather than personal, problem. A student at Swansea reflected that 'perhaps

our perspective and tactics need to change from the focus of the students themselves, to the institutions' (Swansea focus group 1). Indeed, 'placing those feelings in a history of higher education and especially having an active conversation about it makes clear that these are not isolated feelings by 'unlucky' individuals, but something endemic to the institution' (Swansea focus group 1). In this emphasis on institutional change was picking up on some of the ideas that are currently underpinning efforts to address student mental health: that universities should take a 'whole university approach'. Universities UK has recommended the whole universities approach on the basis that 'all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health' (Universities UK 2020, p. 12). This emphasis on institutional change, the Student Minds *University Mental Health Charter* suggests, 'has helped to decisively shift the conversation away from simply considering the provision of services, towards consideration of the impact of the university environment in total and the need for universities to be proactive in supporting students and staff to have good mental health' (Student Minds, p. 7).

Finally, students used the archival material to reflect upon the vexed nature of the negotiation between individual freedom and collective responsibility. In 1970 Korman wrote that

> the greatest part of all in the fight to build a caring society at this university should come from ourselves … If we never become involved with each other the fact of living together cannot make us into a community. We must all work together to counter loneliness and the other social problems of this university. (Korman, 1970)

This was something that contemporary students picked up on in discussions of her article, 'as students … we can't just blame the institutions, we know, we have to do something ourselves', said one male QMUL student (QMUL focus group). The same student later asked

> But what defines a 'real' community? Is it one where students engage in extra-circular activities, or is one where teachers are able to bridge the gap of consciousness to support students? In my view, a 'real community' should not be the focus. This purely because I don't think there is such a thing, or there cannot be in an environment where there are international students, remote students, local students all mixed together into a mini society called 'university'. There cannot possibly be a 'real' version of community with so many varied cultural and social attitudes (student exhibition).

This idea – that universities are a 'mini society' with a plethora of overlapping and distinct communities – underlines the importance of supporting grassroots connections.

Some of the feelings that were provoked by the material were less positive. One Sheffield student noted that it was 'slightly frustrating that this material and these emotional experiences have existed in the historical record for institutions to see and do something about for a significant amount of time' (Sheffield focus group). Furthermore, not all students were convinced that looking at historical material was useful. One student instead emphasised the practical steps that universities could take to build belonging among students (Strathclyde focus group). Nonetheless, while the majority of students who contributed to this project responded positively to the material, using previous generations' experiences to destigmatise loneliness can only ever be one part of a holistic, co-ordinated, structural attempt to address the struggles embedded in university life.

Discussion

Research has underlined the extent of loneliness among contemporary students and has emphasised the positive steps that universities can take to address it (Ellard et al., 2023). Contemporary students are not an anomaly in their expression of social fragmentation and personal discontent; universities have long been troubled and troubling spaces for young people. Just as other research has explored using creative endeavours to support distressed students (Gee et al., 2019), this project explored the potential for historical knowledge – and the space to develop, discuss, and draw from this knowledge together – to provide a reflective lens on university life. There are many differences between the lives of students in the 1960s and the 1970s and today, ranging from the ubiquitous presence of the digital to the structural, such as the neoliberalisation of the academy. Nonetheless, this small-scale study suggests that past students' experiences can help contemporary students understand the academy in new ways. While historical knowledge cannot fix emotional or social problems, this research has argued that it can equip students with new tools to approach the present. More work is needed, however, to explore the wider potential of the discussion of student histories as a tool for lonely students and to then assess the implications of these conversations.

In focus groups, four key themes emerged around *sociability and identity*, *the challenges of the first year*, *the need for meaning and depth in social interactions, and the impact of student accommodation design and university spaces*. These were no doubt stimulated by the content of the student-authored articles selected by the researcher, but all focus group participants were able to connect comments made over fifty years ago to their contemporary experiences, pointing to the endurance of these themes in student life. Many factors contribute to loneliness and, as such, the subject benefits from a multi-disciplinary approach, as Michelle Lim, Robert Eres and Shradha Vasan (2020) underlined.

How, then, could the findings of this small-scale project be taken forward? Most urgently, there is a need for more research into the potential use of history as a tool for empowering students to critically reflect upon their expectations and experiences with their peers. This project was limited by its small scale, and emerging projects should be attentive to the specific needs and responses of marginalised students. More narrowly, however, this scoping project leads to three tentative suggestions for ways that students could be brought into contact with historical accounts of student life: the inclusion of historical material that centres student experiences – rather than institutional histories – in written induction material aimed at new students; the creation of in-person or virtual opportunities for students to engage with archived student material (to create opportunities for students to use the material as a launchpad to consider their own expectations); the exhibition of archival material in student spaces (to enable more incidental interactions and to prompt discussion).

Conclusion

This project had two strands: to explore student loneliness in the past, and to work with current students to investigate their responses to past students' emotional experiences. There are, of course, marked differences between the past and the present in British

higher education. The interest of this particular project, though, was in similarities and resonances between past and present. It was also interested in the effects of these resonances. The first strand of the research established that the problem of student loneliness is not new; social fragmentation within universities predates the ideological and technological artefacts of modernity. This discovery was, for many of the students in the focus groups, destigmatising, and shifted their attention to the institutional contexts of loneliness. Discussions with students has shown that historical knowledge can be one way of opening up interrogations of the present, but that it is a complement to, not a substitute for, more expansive and ambitious attempts to grapple with the scale of their distress.

Note

1. Archival material that gave insight into lecturers', university administrators', and university doctors' views of student loneliness will be drawn upon in a subsequent publication. Although this archival material is rich, it fell outside the scope of this piece of research. The aim of this project was to explore previous *students'* experiences of loneliness with contemporary students. I therefore excluded non student-produced material – university committee minutes, etc. – from consideration here.

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