STUDENT LONELINESS REPORT 2020

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CUSU

Introduction

In recent years, student loneliness has attracted increasing attention within the Higher Education sector. This report offers a more detailed understanding of this issue within Cambridge, drawing on data from the *CUSU Student Loneliness Survey.* The *CUSU Student Loneliness Survey* was carried out among students in Michaelmas 2019 and received 1,679 responses.

Key findings of this report include:

- **75% of Cambridge students surveyed feel lonely on a daily or weekly basis.**

- **Student loneliness in Cambridge disproportionately affects certain disadvantaged groups, including BME students, disabled students, working-class students and care-experienced students.**

- **Undergraduate students are less likely to find friends from within their faculty or department, particularly those studying arts/humanities/social sciences Triposes with large cohorts.**

- **Postgraduate students are less likely to find friends from within their college, particularly at PhD level.**

- **18% of students surveyed do not participate in any extra-curricular activities while at university.**

- **62% of students surveyed feel that the intensity of the academic workload in Cambridge is a barrier to making friends and having a healthy social life.**

It is clear from this report that student loneliness is a major problem within Cambridge that is not sufficiently addressed at present. It is my hope that this report will serve as a catalyst for concrete action to tackle this issue.

Given the complex and multi-faceted nature of this issue, this report does not provide concrete recommendations at this stage. Instead, it seeks to act as a starting point for the development of a Student Loneliness Strategy and identifies the key questions that require consideration. A Student Loneliness Forum is scheduled to take place in April 2020 to consider the findings of this report in more detail and discuss potential strategies for tackling student loneliness. These discussions and the ideas that come out of them will feed into the development of a draft Student Loneliness Strategy for the University.

Student Loneliness in Cambridge

1.1   In 2019, Wonkhe published a report into student loneliness within the Higher Education sector, following an online survey of 1,615 students across 103 different universities[1]. Their report provides a useful basis for understanding the issue of student loneliness in a national context.

1.2   In response to the *CUSU Student Loneliness Survey*, 75% of students indicated that they felt lonely on a daily or weekly basis. This compares to a national average of around 49%, according to the Wonkhe report. Within this group, 1 in 4 students reported feeling lonely on a daily basis.

1.3   Comparing those who feel lonely 'often' (daily or weekly) or 'not often' (monthly or less than monthly), Cambridge students recorded a 'net often' percentage[2] of 64%, compared to 16% for the sector as a whole.

How often do you feel lonely at university?	UK	Cambridge
Daily	16%	27%
Weekly	33%	48%
Monthly	19%	14%
Less than monthly	16%	7%
Never	17%	4%
Often (daily/weekly)	49%	75%
Not often (less than monthly/never)	33%	11%
NET OFTEN	16%	64%

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[1] Wonkhe. *Only the lonely - loneliness, student activities and mental wellbeing at university.* Available at wonkhe.com/blogs/only-the-lonely-loneliness-student-activities-and-mental-wellbeing.

[2] Where 'Net Often' is the difference between the percentage feeling lonely on a daily or weekly basis and the percentage feeling lonely less than monthly/never.

1.4 Black/Black British students and Asian/Asian British students were more likely to feel lonely on a regular basis in comparison to the wider student body.

1.5 Other groups reporting higher than average levels of loneliness included disabled students, with 43% feeling lonely on a daily basis, as well as care-experienced and working class students.

1.6 While EU students reported lower than average levels of loneliness (52% net often), non-EU international students were significantly more likely to feel lonely (75% net often).

1.7 Levels of student loneliness were relatively consistent across different levels of study, with the exception of Undergraduate Masters students, who recorded a net often percentage of 73%.

| How often do you feel lonely at university?	NET OFTEN	
Black/Black British	79%	+15%
Disabled Students	79%	+15%
Care-Experienced Students	76%	+12%
International Students (non-EU)	75%	+11%
Working-Class Students	73%	+9%
Asian/Asian British	73%	+9%
Undergraduate Masters	73%	+9%
All Students	64%	

Friendship and Support

2.2   76% of UK students agreed that if they wanted company or to socialise, there were people they could call on, yet this figure was lower among Cambridge students surveyed (66%). Furthermore, respondents were more than twice as likely to feel they did not have people they could call on, in comparison to UK students overall.

If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on.	UK	Cambridge
Strongly Agree	31%	21%
Agree	45%	45%
Neutral	15%	18%
Disagree	6%	12%
Strongly Disagree	2%	5%
Agree	76%	66%
Disagree	8%	17%
NET AGREE	68%	49%

2.3 Finding people to socialise with also appears to be a greater problem for students in later years of study. In this context, it is clear that efforts aimed at tackling student loneliness need to look beyond initial induction events for incoming students and seek to address these issues at all stages of the degree cycle.

If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on.
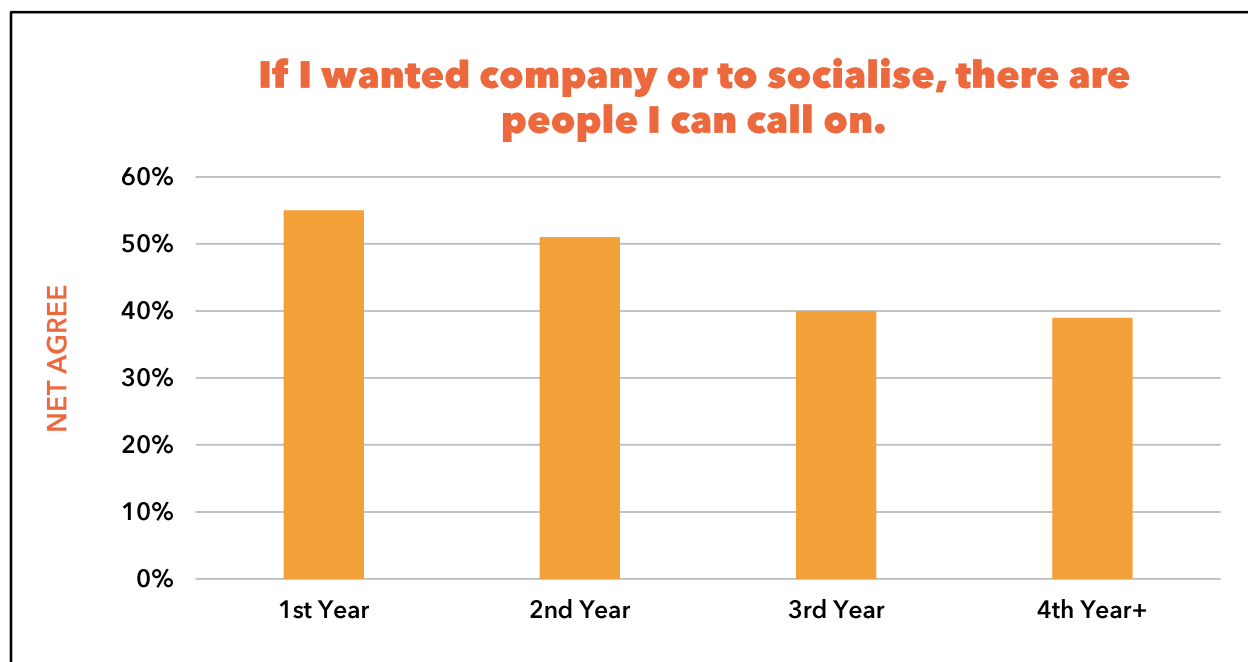
2.4 Although feelings of loneliness did not vary dramatically between different levels of study, Undergraduate Masters, Masters and PhD students were all less likely to feel there were people they could call on for company or socialising.

If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on.
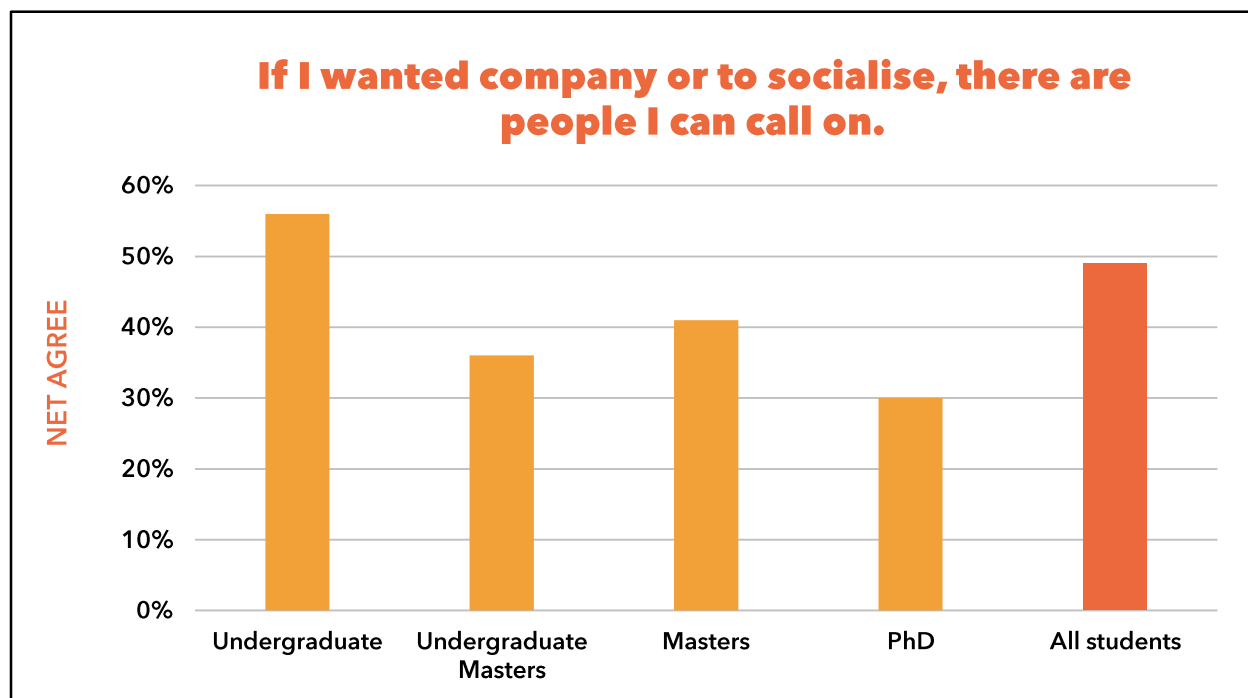
If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on.	NET AGREE
Undergraduate	56%
Undergraduate Masters	36%
Masters	41%
PhD	30%
All Students	49%

2.5   Nearly half of respondents did not feel they had a 'group of friends' of some kind at university. 14% did not consider themselves to have any true friends at university.

Which of the following statements is most like you at university?	
I have a large group of friends at university	15%
I have a small group of friends at university	38%
I have a few friends at university	33%
I do not consider myself to have any true friends at university	14%

2.6 Certain groups of students were more likely to feel that they did not have any true friends at university, including working-class students (22%), BME students (21%), non-EU international students (22%), care-experienced students (36%) and student carers (35%).

'I do not consider myself to have any true friends at university'
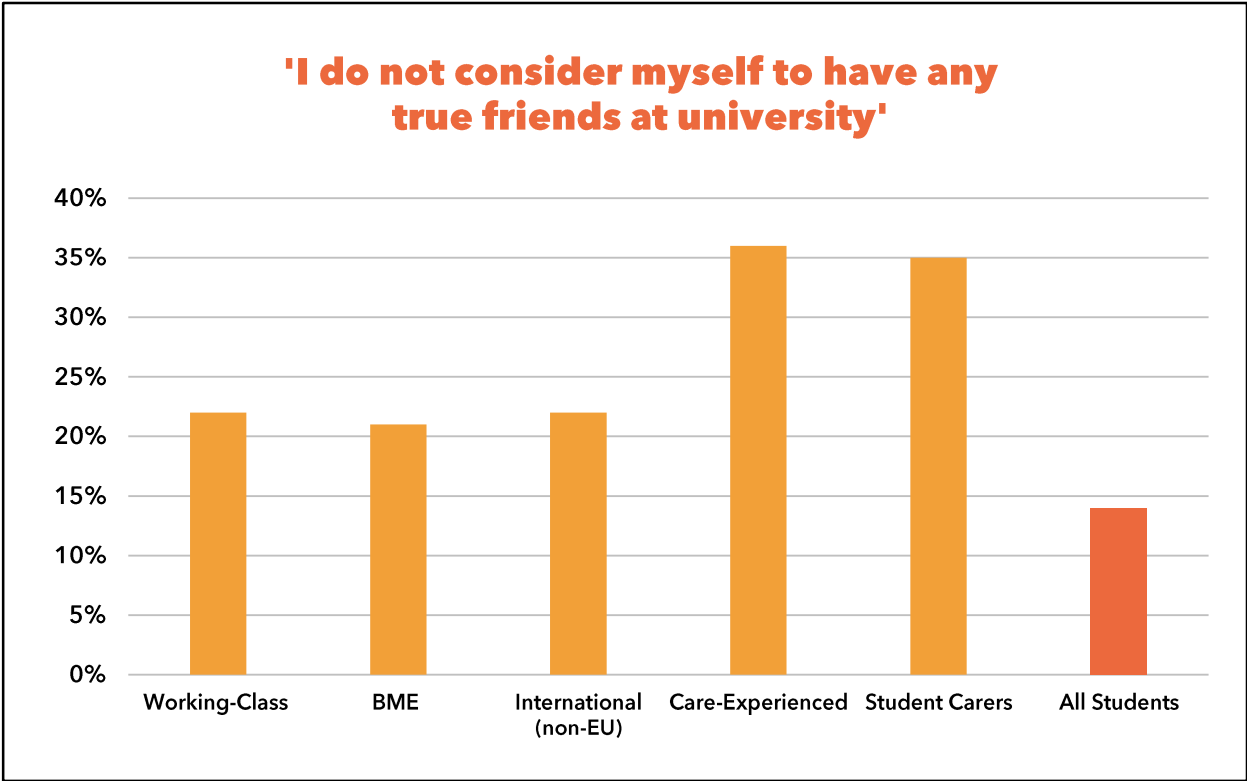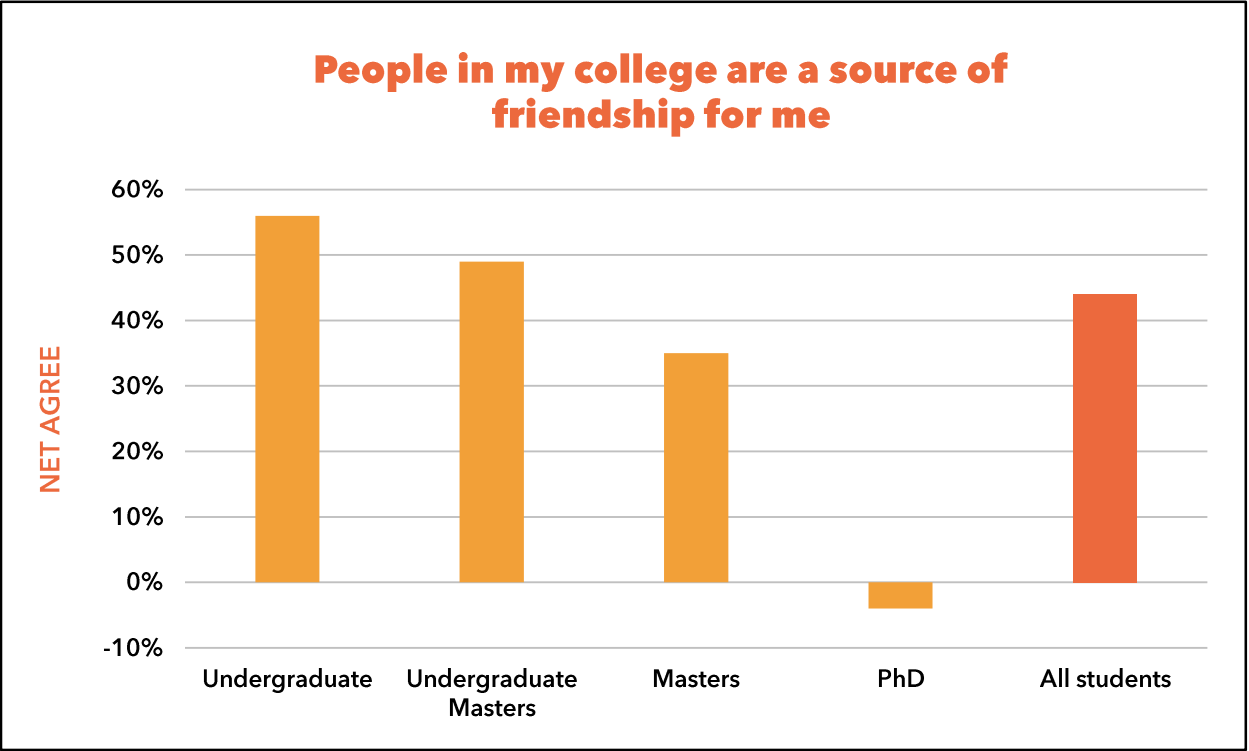
Sources of Friendship

3.1   Students were asked to consider whether people from different communities or activities were important sources of friendship for them at university.

3.2   The majority of students surveyed (65%) felt that people in their college were a source of friendship and this was the most common source of friendship for students.

3.3   Only half of respondents felt that people in their faculty or department were a source of friendship for them.

3.4   Of those students surveyed who participate in sport at university, nearly half felt that the people they played sport with were a source of friendship for them. However, 44% of respondents did not participate in sporting activities.

3.5   Similarly, 51% of students involved in clubs, societies or other extra-curricular activities felt that the people they had met through these activities were a source of friendship.

|	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A	Net Agree
College	26%	39%	14%	12%	9%	0%	44%
Faculty or Department	11%	39%	25%	18%	7%	0%	25%
Sports	6%	21%	17%	8%	4%	44%	16%
Clubs, societies or other activities	10%	32%	25%	12%	4%	18%	25%

3.6   Nearly two-thirds of students surveyed said that they were involved in a club or society of some kind at university, while approximately one-third took part in sport at a college or university level.

3.7   Around 1 in 5 respondents said they did not take part in any activities at university.

Which of the following activities are you involved in?
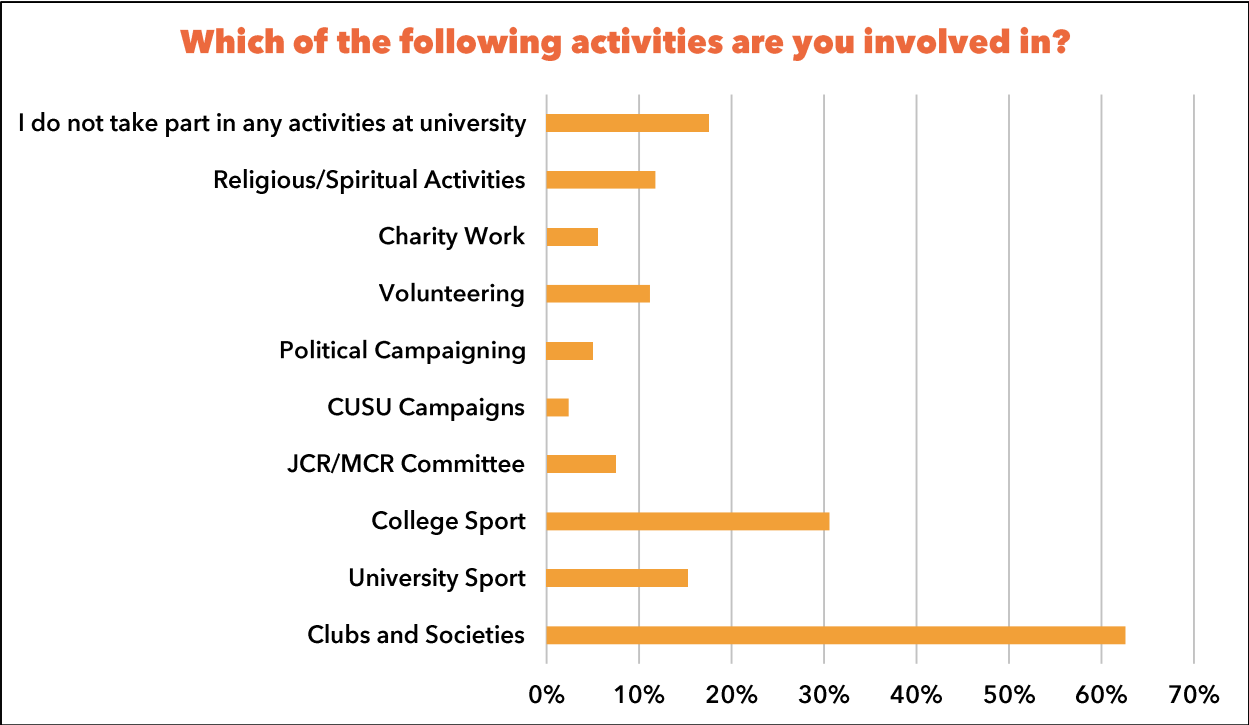
3.8   While undergraduate students were more inclined to see people in their college as a source of friendship, the opposite is true of postgraduate students. This result was most pronounced among PhD students, who were more likely to disagree (42%) that people in their college were a source of friendship for them than agree (38%).

People in my college are a source of friendship for me

3.9   Undergraduate students were less likely to see people in their faculty or department as a source of friendship for them, in comparison to students at higher levels of study. Masters students were the most likely group to agree that people in their faculty or department were a source of friendship for them.

People in my faculty/department are a source of friendship for me
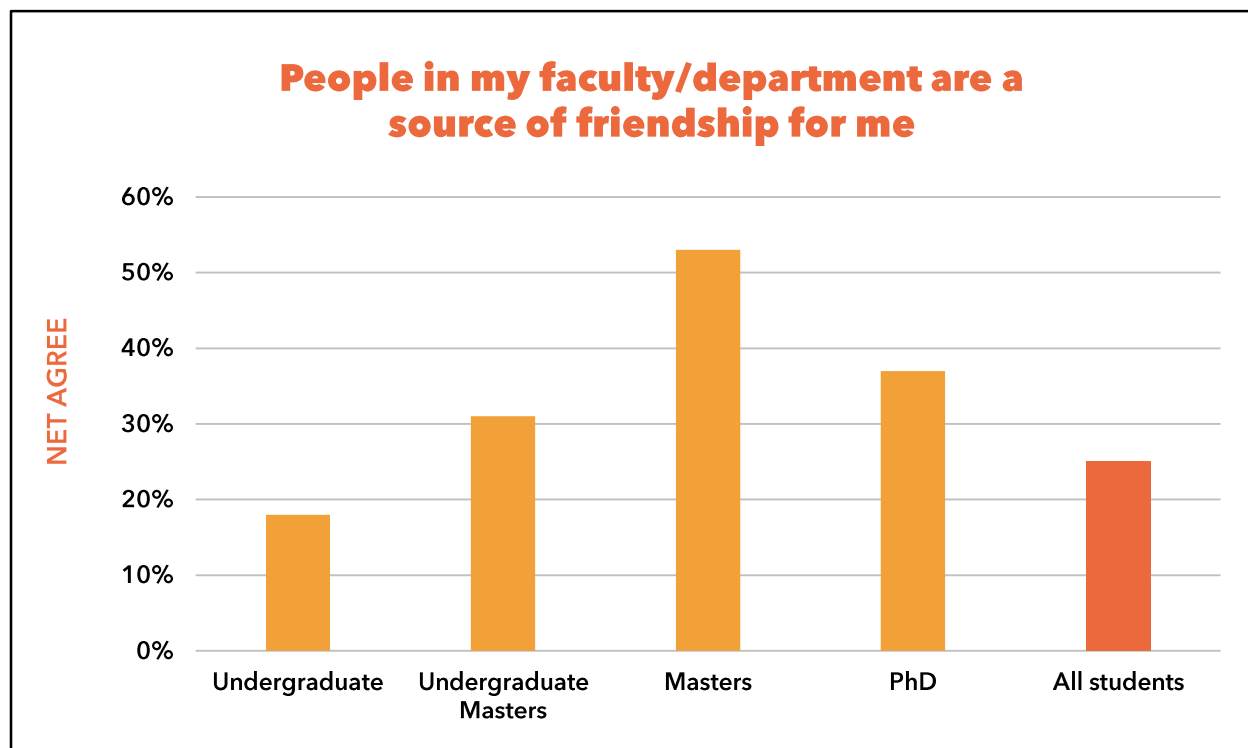

3.10   At the undergraduate level, students studying science, technology and clinical (STC) Triposes were more likely to identify people in their faculty or department as a source of friendship, in comparison to undergraduates as a whole. This pattern is most clear with Medicine (63% net agree), Veterinary Medicine (62%), Engineering (36%) and Computer Science (29%). However, Natural Sciences and Psychological and Behavioural Sciences are both exceptions to this trend.

3.11   Students in arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) Triposes with larger cohorts were significantly less likely to identify people in their faculty or department as a source of friendship. In English, History, HSPS and Law, students were more likely to disagree that people in their faculty or department were a source of friendship for them than agree.

3.12   However, the data shows that this is not simply a question of an arts-sciences divide. In some AHSS Triposes with smaller cohorts, such as Classics and Geography, students were statistically more likely to see people in their faculty or department as a source of friendship, in comparison to undergraduates as a whole.

People in my faculty/department are a source of friendship for me (UG only)

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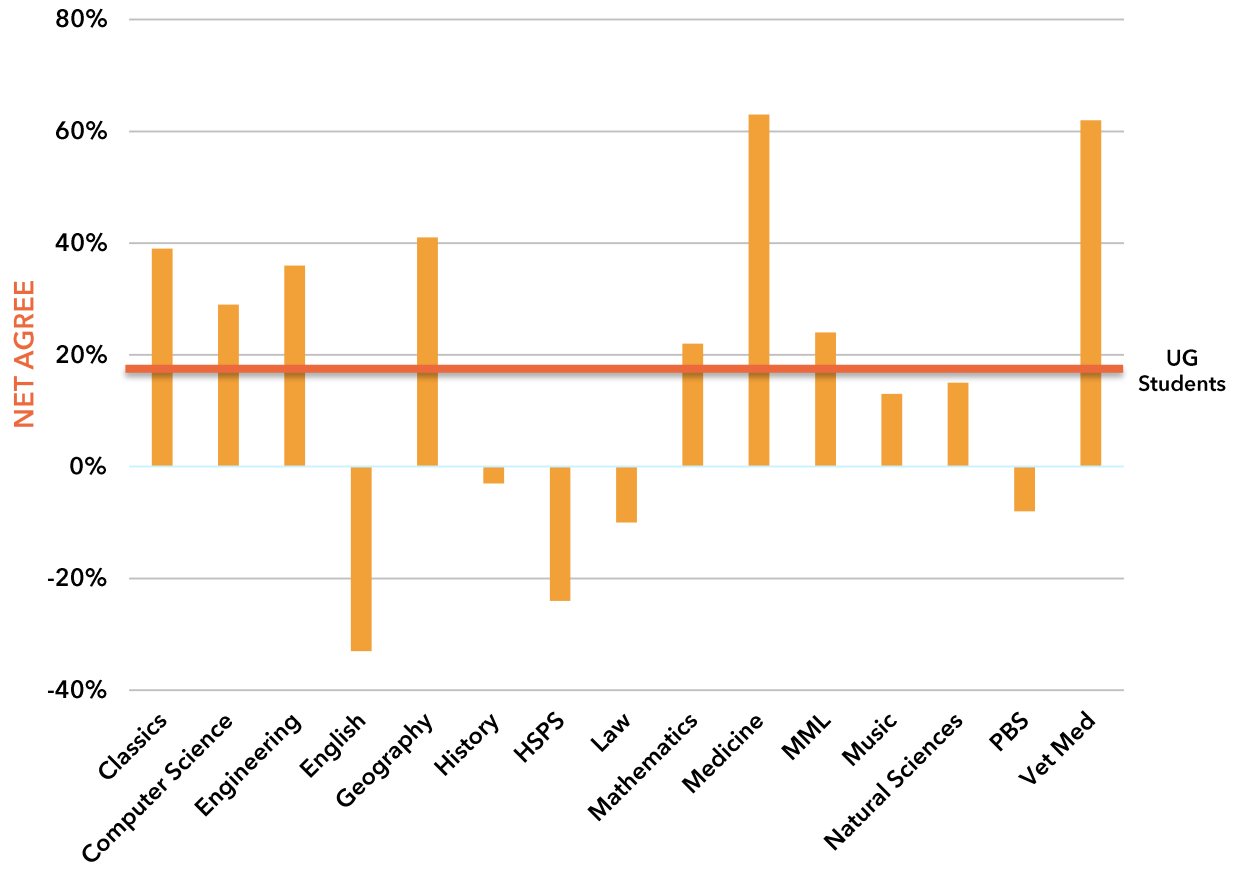
Contributing Factors

4.1   Workload is a key contributing factor to the issue of student loneliness. 62% of students agreed that the intensity of the academic workload in Cambridge was a barrier to making friends and having a healthy social life.

The intensity of the academic workload in Cambridge is a barrier to making friends and having a healthy social life.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Unsure
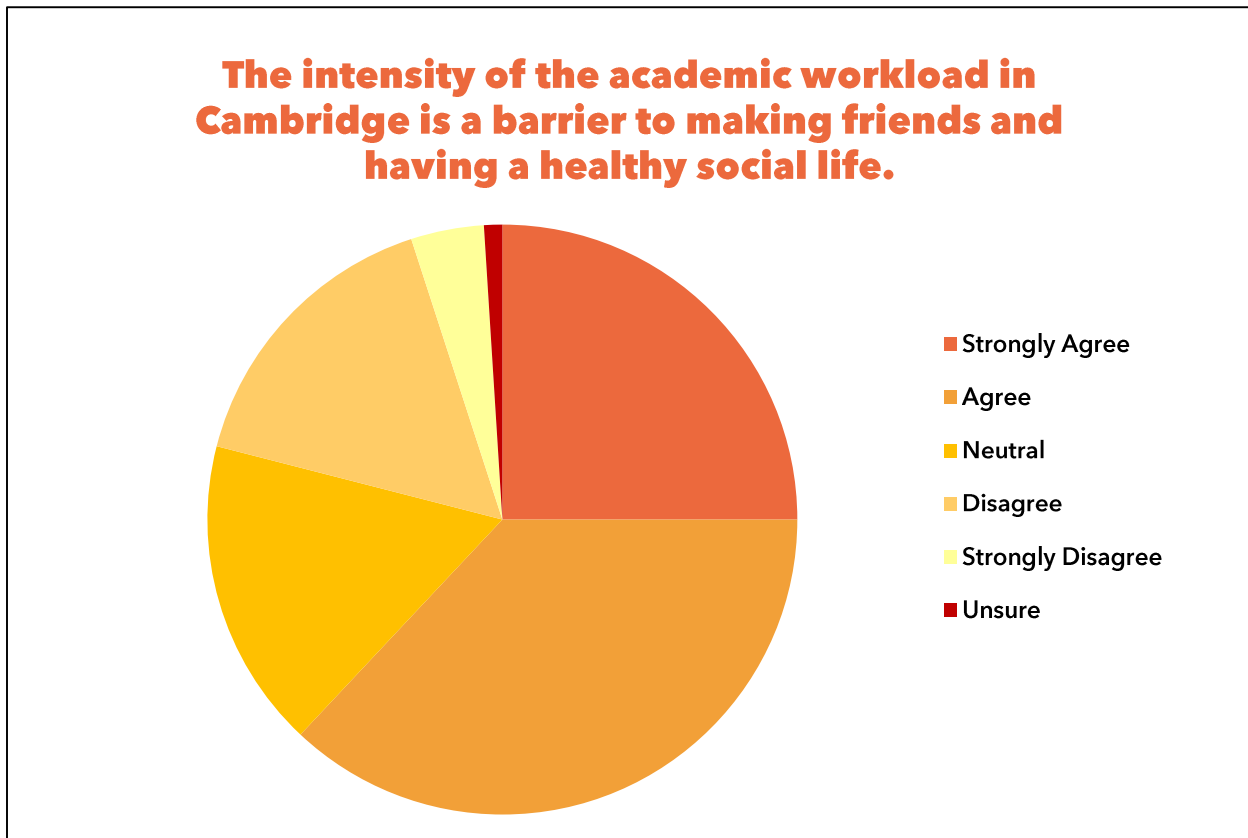
4.2   When asked what they felt the main causes of student loneliness in Cambridge were, the most common contributing factor identified by students was workload.

What do you think the main causes of student loneliness in Cambridge are?

"Work being consistently set, e.g. having supervisions/deadlines over the weekends, means that no one takes the full weekend off to relax and make plans."

"Everything is so crammed and everyone is so busy that there's little time to not do work and have fun/socialize."

"Everyone is so busy and stressed with work that sometimes it's hard to go out and try to meet others."

4.3   Students also highlighted the lack of opportunities to meet other people as a contributing factor. Some students felt there was little opportunity to meet people from *outside* their course; others claimed there were no opportunities to meet *within* their course.

4.4   Despite their college being a key source of friendship for the majority of students, some saw the college system as a contributing factor to student loneliness in Cambridge. Some students highlighted how a failure to initially make friends within college could lead to a sense of exclusion. Others argued that they found it difficult to visit friends they had made at other colleges.

4.5   Students highlighted the limited opportunities to socialise and meet new people beyond Freshers' Week as a potential cause of student loneliness within Cambridge.

4.6   The difficulty of making friends in a short amount of time was a concern raised by some Masters students. PhD students also highlighted the lack of opportunities to meet new people both within and outside of their college.

What do you think the main causes of student loneliness in Cambridge are?

"Can be challenging to form relationships with other people outside of your course because there is little opportunity to do so."

"Lack of interaction opportunities within the course."

"Lack of opportunities to meet people outside of your college, if you struggled to make friends at the start it gets increasingly difficult as other friend groups are already established and people can feel shut out or excluded."

"I think the collegiate system itself can actually be a barrier to friendships. The huge walls and security locks of other colleges mean that if you have friends outside of your college, it is very difficult to see them. There are very few opportunities in Cambridge or places to socialise that aren't within College or are not restricted to College members only."

"No opportunities to make friends once fresher's week [sic] is passed"

"PhD students do not have the same opportunity to socialise outside of their college or form close friendship groups as students who spend multiple hours a day working in the same course do."

"As a PhD student who did not start in the regular Michaelmas term, but instead in Lent, I was unable to make friends at college. There wasn't a second orientation, most people had already formed strong friend groups and weren't too inclusive at that point."

"Poor opportunities for postgraduates in 9-month courses to make lasting friendships."

4.7   For certain groups of students, their identity/background was seen to be a barrier to making friends.

4.8   47% of Asian/Asian British students and 46% of Black/Black British students felt that their identity/background had prevented them from forming friendships at university, as did 47% of care-experienced students and one-third of working-class students.

Key Conclusions

5.1   Student loneliness is a problem throughout the Higher Education sector, but is a particularly significant problem within Cambridge, with 75% of students feeling lonely on a daily or weekly basis.

5.2   Student loneliness in Cambridge disproportionately affects certain disadvantaged groups, including BME students, disabled students, working-class students and care-experienced students.

5.3   Student loneliness can manifest itself in a number of different ways. For some students, it will be reflected in a sense of isolation or a lack of time to socialise. Other students will struggle to make meaningful social connections and form strong friendships while at university, contributing to a sense of loneliness. These will sometimes be overlapping and mutually-reinforcing problems, but both require targeted solutions in order to address them.

5.4   Colleges are a key source of friendship for the majority of undergraduate students, yet this is less likely to be the case for postgraduate students. For PhD students, colleges offer limited opportunities to make friends.

5.5   Faculties and departments are more likely to be a source of friendship for postgraduate students, yet the opposite is true for undergraduate students. At the undergraduate level, students studying AHSS Triposes with large cohorts struggle to make friends within their faculty or department, but this is a less of an issue for students studying STC Trisposes, or AHSS Triposes with smaller cohorts.

5.6   Sports, clubs, societies and other extra-curricular activities can be an important source of friendship for those who participate. However, it is important to recognise that around 1 in 5 students do not participate in any activities while at university.

5.7   Workload is a key contributing factor to student loneliness in Cambridge. 62% of students agreed that the intensity of the academic workload in Cambridge was a barrier to making friends and having a healthy social life.

5.8   A lack of opportunities to meet other people is an important contributing factor to student loneliness.

Towards a Student Loneliness Strategy

This report seeks to act as a starting point in the development of a Student Loneliness Strategy for the University. Four key questions for consideration in the development of this strategy are outlined below.

1. How can feelings of loneliness or isolation among students be identified and tackled?

    o   *What is the role of the tutorial system?*
    o   *What are the most effective measures of tackling these feelings?*

2. How do we address the specific problem of higher levels of loneliness among specific groups of students?

    o   *BME students*
    o   *Students from working-class backgrounds*
    o   *Care-experienced students*
    o   *Disabled students*
    o   *International students*
    o   *Undergraduate Masters students*

3. How can the Collegiate University provide a greater number of opportunities for students to socialise and meet new people?

    o   *What is the role of colleges?*
    o   *What is the role of faculties and departments?*
    o   *What is the role of the Students' Union?*
    o   *What is the role of clubs, societies, sports and other extra-curricular activities?*
    o   *How do we ensure the provision of these opportunities beyond Freshers' Week and other induction activities?*
    o   *How do we address the different needs of undergraduates and postgraduates?*

4. How can the wider issues which contribute to student loneliness be tackled?

    o   *Student workload*
    o   *Limitations of the collegiate system*
    o   *Lack of support for certain groups of students*
    o   *Lack of diversity in student intake*

A Student Loneliness Forum is planned for April 2020 to consider the findings of this report in more detail and allow for great discussion of them. This forum will look to discuss potential strategies for tackling student loneliness and feed into the development of a Student Loneliness Strategy for the University. CUSU will be inviting Senior Tutors, College Tutors, College Nurses, Heads of Schools, Faculties and Departments, student representatives, and other members of staff responsible for student welfare within the Collegiate University to this forum.

Appendix 1: Methodology and Respondents

The *CUSU Student Loneliness Survey* was conducted among current Cambridge University students in Michaelmas 2019 and received 1,679 responses. Survey respondents were self-selecting, so there is likely to be some risk of sampling bias. Responses were not weighted and some groups of students are overrepresented. Nevertheless, given the large overall sample size, the results of the survey provide a useful starting point for understanding the problem of student loneliness within Cambridge and how it affects different groups of students.

Gender	
Man	671
Woman	944
Non Binary	32
Other	11
Prefer not to say	18
No response	3

Transgender	
Yes	22
No	1623
Other	6
Prefer not to say	22
No response	6

Sexuality	
Heterosexual	1130
Gay	69
Lesbian	32
Bisexual	263
Asexual	40
Other	32
Prefer not to say	107
No response	5

Race/Ethnicity	
Arab	11
Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	13
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	109
Asian/Asian British: Indian	57
Asian/Asian British: Pakistani	21
Any other Asian background	43
Black/Black British: African	17
Black/Black British: Caribbean	5
Any other Black background	3
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian	46
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black African	5
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean	8
White: British	866
White: Irish	24
White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller	1
Any other White background	383
Any other ethnic group	32
No response	6

Disabled (inclusive of specific learning disabilities, mental health issues and long-term illnesses)	
Yes	270
No	1283
Unsure	100
Other	21
No response	5

Caring responsibilities	
Yes	49
No	1602
Prefer not to say	4
No response	8

Lived in care	
Yes, I have previously	21
Yes, I did upon application to university	13
No	1639
No response	6

Education background	
Independent/private (fee-paying)	604
State grammar/selective (non-fee paying)	453
State comprehensive (non-fee paying)	732
Other (please specify)	94
No response	10

Working-class	
Yes	488
No	1121
Prefer not to say	63
No response	7

Living situation outside of term	
Living alone	137
Living with parents	1335
Living with other family/relatives	31
Living with partner/friends	133
Other (please specify)	55
No response	8

Permanent Cambridge residency	
Yes	302
No	1370
No response	7

College	
Christ's College	57
Churchill College	53
Clare College	71
Clare Hall	12
Corpus Christi College	31
Darwin College	28
Downing College	45
Emmanuel College	72
Fitzwilliam College	63
Girton College	70
Gonville and Caius College	53
Homerton College	102
Hughes Hall	36
Jesus College	73
King's College	48
Lucy Cavendish College	40
Magdalene College	26
Murray Edwards	45
Newnham College	78
Pembroke College	64
Peterhouse	43
Queens' College	50
Robinson College	44
Selwyn College	52
Sidney Sussex College	35
St Catharine's College	58
St Edmund's College	21
St John's College	63
Trinity College	108
Trinity Hall	48
Wolfson College	30
N/A	8
No response	47

Home/International Student	
Home student	1101
I am an International Student from outside the EU	264
I am an International Student from within the EU	265
No response	48

Student status	
Undergraduate	1127
Undergraduate Masters	79
Masters or equivalent (MPhil, MRes, MLitt, MSt, etc.)	169
PhD or equivalent	257
No response	45

Year of study	
1st	727
2nd	408
3rd	303
4th	165
Other, e.g. visiting, writing-up, intermission etc. (please specify)	27
No response	49

Tripos (UG only)	
Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic	7
Archaeology	14
Architecture	9
Asian and Middle Eastern Studies	12
Chemical Engineering	8
Classics	30
Computer Science	53
Economics	23
Education	10
Engineering	76
English	74
Geography	34
History	69
History and Modern Languages	8
History and Politics	12
History of Art	7
Human, Social, and Political Sciences	54
Land Economy	14
Law	59
Linguistics	16
Manufacturing Engineering	3
Mathematics	108
Medicine	85
Modern and Medieval Languages	73
Music	25
Natural Sciences	201
Philosophy	20
Psychological and Behavioural Sciences	26
Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion	13
Veterinary Medicine	23
Other (please specify)	11
No response	501

Faculty (PG only)	
Centre for Research in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	7
Department of History and Philosophy of Science	4
Faculty of Architecture and History of Art	5
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies	5
Faculty of Biology	42
Faculty of Business and Management	7
Faculty of Classics	3
Faculty of Computer Science and Technology	9
Faculty of Divinity	5
Faculty of Earth Sciences and Geography	14
Faculty of Economics	4
Faculty of Education	46
Faculty of Engineering	36
Faculty of English	19
Faculty of History	24
Faculty of Human, Social and Political Sciences	20
Faculty of Law	17
Faculty of Mathematics	22
Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages	14
Faculty of Music	2
Faculty of Philosophy	3
Faculty of Physics and Chemistry	44
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine	4
Institute of Criminology	2
School of Clinical Medicine	35
Other or multiple faculties (please specify)	30
No response	1256