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Leaving or Staying “Home” in a Time of Rupture: International Students’ Experiences of Loneliness and Social Isolation during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

During COVID-19, international students were faced with the decision of remaining in their country of study or returning to their home countries, with little knowledge of when they would next be able to return or leave. Both choices left the students vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and social isolation. This paper examines how international students at a Scottish university experienced and navigated leaving or staying “home” and how loneliness and social isolation characterised these experiences. We further contextualise these experiences through Holbraad et al.’s (2019) prism of “rupture”. The data were generated between February-July 2021 through semi-structured focus groups and qualitative questionnaire comments and were analysed through Thematic Analysis. We discuss three themes: 1) Liminal Friends and Strangers, 2) Sense of Home and Family, and 3) Staying or Leaving the Country. The study contributes to the expanding body of research on experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst international students.

Keywords: COVID-19, international students, loneliness, qualitative, rupture, Scotland, social isolation

In the academic year 2020/21, over 584,100 international students¹ were studying at universities in the United Kingdom (UK), constituting 22% of the total student

¹ In this paper, ‘international student’ refers to a person who has moved outside of their home country and who is enrolled at a university to complete an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (OECD, 2019). In the context of this paper, the term does not encompass credit mobile students who are

population (UK Government, 2022). More than 58,000 of these students were studying at Scottish universities (Universities Scotland, 2022). Scotland's appeal for international students worldwide has been reported to be due to English being its instructional language, the perceived high quality of programmes and the cost of study and living (Barron et al. 2009; Bell, 2016). Prior to Brexit – the UK leaving the European Union (EU) – Scotland was also particularly attractive to EU students, as the country unlike other countries in the UK offered EU students free university tuition. Since Brexit, the number of EU student application to study at Scottish universities have sharply declined, but student recruitment from beyond the EU has remained strong (Universities Scotland, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes to everyday life and students' experiences in Higher Education. In the UK and Scotland, social distancing restrictions and self-isolation measures were introduced in March 2020, which remained in place to varying degrees until July 2021 (Scottish Government, 2021). Although travel, at times, was restricted within the UK and Scotland, international students were more acutely affected by international travel restrictions and their accompanying uncertainty than domestic students; leaving them with the choice of either staying in Scotland or returning to their home countries without a clear idea of when they would be able to leave or return.

This study explores international students' experiences of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19. Notably, the study is based in, and focused on, international students at a small university in Scotland. However, the study of loneliness and social isolation is of internal concern in Higher Education and there may be synergies between the experiences of students in this study and those from, and studying in, different national and cultural contexts.

Even before the pandemic, feelings of loneliness and social isolation were common amongst people in Scotland (Our Voice Citizen's Panel, 2017) and they have further increased as a result of the pandemic (Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2022). This study distinguishes between the concepts of loneliness and social isolation. In line with the definitions informing the Scottish Government's (2018) strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness in Scotland, loneliness refers to a "subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have and those we have" (p. 16). Social isolation, on the other hand, refers to when "an individual has an objective lack of social relationships (in terms of quality and/or quantity) at individual, group, community and societal levels" (p. 16). The two may be linked but not automatically or necessarily so – a person who appears well connected may feel lonely or people who have few connections may not feel lonely at all; the difference between them lies in the subjective and emotional experience of loneliness.

Experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst international students specifically are also well-documented, both before the pandemic and during it.

studying at the university for a brief period of time as part of an international exchange programme (OECD, 2019). It is not clear in the report whether this number includes credit mobile students or not.

These studies highlight important experiences related to the international student experience in a range of cultural contexts, highlighting the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and of experiences of loneliness and/or social isolation overall. Notable in the case of Scotland, is a recent study by Lui et al. (2022) on challenges faced by Chinese students in Scotland during COVID-19, noting how loneliness and social isolation affected the students' mental health. Similar findings have been highlighted by international students of various nationalities studying in other countries, including Malaysia (Yassin et al., 2021), Portugal (Malet Calvo et al., 2021) and Greece (Diamanti & Nikolaou, 2021). However, no studies have so far specifically explored the experiences of loneliness and social isolation in depth amongst international students during COVID-19, in Scotland or elsewhere. Indeed, there is a lack of rich qualitative data on the lived experiences of international students, as well as qualitative studies investigating both the concepts of loneliness and social isolation as two separate, but interlinked, concepts. In beginning to shed more light on such experiences, this study focuses on international students studying in Scotland in particular. The legislation and restrictions varied significantly across the different countries in UK, making the specific Scottish context valuable in understanding the experiences of international students in the country during this time.

Furthermore, the critical decision of whether to stay or to leave, increased difficulties in building new relationships due to COVID restrictions, intensified challenges related to mental health and the general sense of unsettlement and disruption brought on by the pandemic presents a unique context to help us better understand the challenges international students faced during this time of rupture. Although some international student experiences discussed in this paper will resonate with domestic students, they stood out as particularly prominent amongst the international students in our sample to the extent that a specific focus on their experiences – as opposed to the general student body – were justified. The study will also contribute to the expanding body of research on experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst university students, and international students specifically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Loneliness has long been considered endemic amongst international students, internationally (Sawir et al., 2008) and within the UK, with Wavera and McCamely (2020) reporting that 72% of the international students in their sample had felt lonely since coming to the UK. Studies exploring international students' experiences in the UK have emphasised how loneliness can emerge due to socio-political factors, such as stereotyping (Wee, 2019), race (King et al., 2020) and cultural differences (Hernández López, 2020). International research has also highlighted elements such as language barriers (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), challenges in building relationships with locals (Costello, 2015; Adewale et al., 2018) and homesickness (Wu & Hammond, 2011), which can make it difficult to

build new relationships and support networks (Wavera & McCamley, 2020). Most international students live far away from their families and extended social circles and are, for that reason, more likely to experience social isolation than domestic students (Kivelä et al., 2022; Koo & Nyunt, 2022). However, over time most international students do build new support networks and a life in their new country (Sawir et al., 2008). Such experiences have been found to defy national borders and cultural contexts.

Evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on international students in the UK and internationally is emerging and has already received some notable attention (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021). In the UK, studies have shown how the pandemic negatively impacted international students' mental health (Al-Oraibi et al., 2022) and academic experience (Frampton et al., 2022). International research has further explored international student mobility (Mok et al., 2021 – for China and Hong Kong), stress and coping amongst international students (Kim & Kim, 2022 – for South Korea), sense of connection and belonging (Weng et al., 2021 – for Australia), fear and sense of control (Elemo et al., 2022 – for Turkey) the impact of restricted international travel (Malet Calvo et al., 2022 – for Portugal) and fear over their own and others' health (Cao & Chieu, 2021 – for The Netherlands). Overall, having a limited social circle and social interaction, not being able to go back to their home country and feelings of homesickness have been found to result in experiences of loneliness and social isolation during this time (Koo & Nyunt, 2022 – for USA).

Discussing the international travel restrictions imposed in the USA during the pandemic, Mbous et al. (2022) found that these restrictions were partially felt to be a relief amongst the international students in their sample, as it minimised the risk of them contaminating their families (see also Diamanti & Nikolaou, 2021 – for Greece). However, they also noted the impact of the increased price of flight tickets, which led some who would have liked to go back to their home country to stay in the USA. Not being able to return was seen as contributing to feelings of homesickness, as they were geographically and intimately cut off from their families, which was accentuated by the uncertainty of when they would be able to go and – if they did leave – be able to return to the USA (Mbous et al., 2022). In discussing this, the participants noted the sense of “privilege” and “freedom” that their local peers had in comparison. Vasileiou et al.'s (2019) pre-pandemic finding, that many UK undergraduate students – not specifically international students – either visited home or knew that they could do so if needed to manage their feelings of loneliness, is notable in a context where this was not an accessible or viable remedy for such feelings. Furthermore, Scottish students highlighted that staying in contact with others was crucial to achieving a sense of normality during the pandemic, they also noted that this was easier for some than for others (Butler-Warke et al., 2021).

There are also accounts from international students who did return to their home country during the pandemic, noting the challenges that emerge when moving back into the family home. Diamanti and Nikolaou (2021) found that their participants – international students who returned to Greece during the pandemic – experienced emotional tensions arising from the coexistence with their families

for an extended time. Similarly, Loh (2003) explored international students' construction of home and identity across cultures, discussing the "return culture shock" their participants felt when returning to their home countries. For many of Loh's participants, their host country had become a second home where they had constructed a new identity, social group and routines. Much research has focused on identity construction amongst international students, with some arguing that many take on a hybrid-national identity (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Adewale et al., 2018) and a sense of personal growth after living in a different country (Costello, 2015). With this, identity construction is not about international students assimilating to the new culture, but about negotiating and managing competing and dynamic identities (Gomes et al., 2014; Marginson, 2014).

Whilst previous work has addressed the notion of students returning to their home country or staying in their country of study during the pandemic, these studies have not discussed the underlying experience of rupture that shaped their decision and their managing of constraints and transitions in a time of both social and personal uncertainty. As such, this paper aims to examine the factors and experiences in this time of rupture (Holbraad et al., 2019) that contributed to international students' feelings of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19. Furthermore, this study also gives specific attention to the lived experience of loneliness and social isolation, which will complement existing pre-COVID studies on loneliness and social isolation amongst international students (Sawir et al., 2008), quantitative reporting of loneliness during COVID-19 (Kivelä et al., 2022) as well as expand on findings where such experience feature but are not discussed in-depth in a COVID-context (Koo & Nyunt, 2022; Lui et al., 2022).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Conceptual Framework

Viewing the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as a rupture in everyday life, our investigation into international students' experiences of loneliness and social isolation during this period was informed by Holbraad et al.'s (2019) conceptualisation of this. The key feature of this conceptualisation is rupture as "a radical and often forceful form of discontinuity" (Holbraad et al., 2019, p. 1) involving "encountering some element in the social world so unusual and unanticipated its very foreignness corrodes the background sense of normalcy" (Shaw, 2021, p. 1230). Rupture can occur both at a personal level (e.g., an adverse experience) and a societal level (e.g., a global pandemic) – or, as in this case, a combination of the two. Notably for this study, Holbraad et al.'s notion of rupture emphasises not only its negative and challenging effects but also valuable moments that emerge through discontinuity, as rupture requires us to reorient ourselves. Whilst theoretically informed by the pandemic as an experience of

rupture, this did not influence the practical methods employed, which allowed for the emergence of themes directly from the lifeworld of participants.

Methodology and Methods

The qualitative study utilised a psycho-social, phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, built on the recognition that “there is a relationship between the mind and the world” (Howell, 2013, p. 55) aims to generate understanding of a phenomenon or event through the experience of individuals, taking you “inside” that experience rather than explaining it. The data generation approach and method of analysis were interpretive. This acknowledges understandings and experiences as bound to, and informed by, social context and meaning as continuously constructed and reproduced (Holloway, 1997). A qualitative approach is thus best suited to the generation of the rich data needed for such an enquiry.

This study is part of a larger mixed-methods study of students’ experiences of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19 (Sagan et al., 2022). The larger study did not have a specific focus on international students, yet the distinct experiences of this group came through in the data. The data presented here were generated in two phases. The first phase was a questionnaire, open between February-June 2021 and issued to all students at the university. The period in which the questionnaire was live saw several changes in Scotland’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic: from strict lockdown to the announcement of the easing of restrictions. The questionnaire included quantitative measures, predominately Likert scales, as well as qualitative comments in response to open-ended questions; only the qualitative comments have been included in this data set.

The second phase involved focus groups with students that expanded on the questions in the questionnaire. We conducted four focus groups with a total of 12 students in July 2021 over MS Teams, in line with COVID guidelines at the time. The participants in the focus groups indicated that they were interested in taking part in a focus group in their response to the questionnaire. The focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured approach, with a set of questions as a guide for the conversation, whilst still allowing for flexibility (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The small number of participants, between 3 and 5 in each focus group, was beneficial in facilitating in-depth conversations that would not have been possible with bigger groups. This gave all participants the chance to speak about their experiences, reflect on the questions asked as well as pursue alternative lines of conversation in significant detail. The length of the focus groups ranged from 1 hour 32 minutes to 2 hours and 22 minutes. The discussions were transcribed verbatim, and participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms. The study was granted ethical approval by the university’s ethics committee, and we adhered to principles of ethical research practice in all phases of the research.

The approach of the focus groups allowed us to form a broad understanding of the experience of rupture, loneliness and social isolation amongst the students, as well as an in-depth awareness of specific subjective aspects of the students’ lived experiences. This combination of methods captured the breadth and

complexity of these experiences (Creswell, 2006). The focus group data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding and identification of key themes and subthemes was made firstly individually by each researcher and subsequently discussed, re-analysed and coded again through a reflexive, iterative process. The qualitative comments from the questionnaires were then organised into the themes as appropriate, and accounts of experiences that had not come up in the focus groups were maintained as subthemes.

Participants

The focus groups comprised 12 students, six of whom were international students from EU countries. All participants in the focus groups had indicated their interest in taking part at the end of the questionnaire. As with the questionnaire and the overall study, the explicit focus of the focus groups was not international students' experiences. However, only accounts from the six the international students' are included in this paper.

A total of 296 students completed the questionnaire. Although not asked directly if the student was a domestic or international student 94 were identified as international based on their answer to the question "what country are you from?" being a country other than the United Kingdom, those being countries in Europe (76), the Americas (8), Asia (8), Africa (1) and Oceania (1). The qualitative comments from those 94 students were also analysed as part of this paper.

The study took place at a small university in Scotland, with a diverse student body that includes a significant number of international students. The domestic/international student balance (in the questionnaire: 68% from the UK, 32% international; and in the focus group 50% from the UK, 50% international) is roughly aligned with that of the university's student body, which in the academic year of 2020/21 was made up of 51.4% UK students and 48.6% international students.

In the analysis of all data – from both the focus groups and qualitative questionnaire comments – we identified the international students and their experiences broadly fit into two groups: the first group is characterised by having stayed in Scotland during the pandemic and the second by having returned to their home country.

Limitations

There are three key limitations associated with this study that can be considered in future research. Firstly, had we explicitly asked students to identify as an international student in the questionnaire this would have provided a clearer idea of who belonged to that category, as opposed to using their response to ask them to identify their country of origin. Secondly, most international students in this study – and all but one partaking in the focus groups – were white European and would be categorised as EU students. In the case of the focus group, this information was obtained from their responses to the questionnaire. The focus

group participants gave their consent for their questionnaire responses to be linked to them; data from all other participants were handled confidentially and anonymously. As such, a more diverse (geographical and cultural) sample of participants could provide deeper insights into experiences across students under the international student umbrella. Thirdly, the sample size in the focus group was small. Although a smaller sample is appropriate for focus groups, a greater number of participants may yield further insights into international students' experiences of loneliness and social isolation in future studies.

Despite these limitations, we emphasise that the findings of this study were not intended to be generalisable. Indeed, we acknowledge the situatedness of the study and our focus on a specific student population at one specific Scottish university; these elements are considered a strength as the participant accounts provide evidence which has directly informed the creation and implementation of resources to address some of the challenges they highlighted at the institution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented societal rupture (Holbraad et al., 2019) that has irrevocably shaped international students' lives and experiences at university. Underlying the participants' accounts in this study was the experience of this and the consequent lack and loss of control and sense of disconnection through the rupture of normalcy. Equally, however, are numerous instances of reorientation to – necessarily – deal with the situation at hand. The thematic analysis of the data has resulted in three themes, all focused on instances and factors related to rupture that resulted in feelings of loneliness and social isolation amongst the participants. Each theme has arisen from the life experience narrative of the international students and is framed around the concept of rupture. As such, the themes are interlinked and not perceived as separate and disconnected entities. Together they provide an insight into, and conceptual understanding of, the distinct experiences of these international students in a time of experienced rupture. The three themes are: 1) Liminal Friends and Strangers, 2) Sense of Home and Family, and 3) Staying or Leaving the Country.

Liminal Friends and Strangers

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has often been referred to as a “globally shared experience” (Seo, 2022, p. 1) on a societal level, forming the foundation for the many shared challenges that have faced students in Higher Education during this time (Philips et al., 2022). Whilst some challenges and experiences are shared amongst students across countries and institutions, some experiences are unique to distinct student groups.

Considering both loneliness and social isolation, previous studies have acknowledged that some groups of students – notably international students – are prone to experience both during their time at university (Kivelä et al., 2022). During COVID-19, the awareness of such experiences amongst students gained increased attention, bringing “a longstanding issue into the open” (Philips et al.,

2022, p. 289). However, several participants in this study expressed that there was still a lack of understanding regarding how loneliness and social isolation are experienced among international students. One student commented:

The isolation that I feel is only understood by very few of my peers. My family is in the USA and has had a very different experience of COVID. My peers who are from the UK have also had a different experience of COVID. It feels like it should be a shared experience but it's not. (Questionnaire Comment)

As this student highlights, although the COVID-19 pandemic can overall be perceived as a shared experience of rupture with restrictions applying and affecting the whole population of Scotland and to some extent people globally, the experiences of rupture on an individual level differ. Even at an international student level, studies have – unsurprisingly – found that no two experiences of international students even from within the same culture are identical (Skyrme, 2007). As such, with international students having been identified as particularly prone to experiences of both loneliness and social isolation, theoretically sharing such experiences with many others should – as this student notes – be a shared experience; instead, however, they experience it as adding to their experience of isolation because the contextual factors are significantly different.

Furthermore, there were similarities across most participants' experiences of not having as strong or as established a network as their local peers. Again, aligning with existing findings (Sawir et al., 2008; Wavera & McCamley, 2020), the participants in this study emphasised that they had left their support networks and relationships behind when coming to Scotland. However, as has not been reported in pre-COVID studies, they did also express that they had made new friends, but that they did not, or could not, be too reliant on those friends who had other relationships and lives that did not involve them. Clara – who stayed in Scotland during the pandemic – said:

I'm not from the UK and when I moved here I felt really lonely. I was away from my family, from my friends, from everyone I know and suddenly all alone in a totally different country with people I... and then the pandemic happened and I didn't have... of course, I have some friends but they have their lives too. (Clara)

The participants' accounts reveal, in many cases, shared experiences of a sense of rupture and separation from other people, both in the subjective experience of loneliness as well as a lack of relationships in socially isolation terms. Such experiences were particularly prominent amongst the participants who had recently arrived in Scotland. However, as opposed to previous studies, those experiences did not emerge from the feeling of a lack of interest from local peers (Costello, 2015; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017) or socio-political barriers (Wee, 2019) making it difficult to build relationships, but were largely due to the disruption that the pandemic caused in terms of restricting face-to-face opportunities to do so (Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2021; Thorson et al. 2021). In considering rupture, then, Clara's comment illustrates how in the months before

the pandemic she started to develop relationships and a support network but that the process of doing so was disrupted by the onset of the pandemic. This rupture – not only social but also personal – required her to reorient herself within these relationships, particularly as opportunities to develop them “organically” in a university context (such as in, before and after classes) were restricted, at times removed completely.

Relatedly, Johanna discussed investment in relationships and expressed how she had felt lonely after having moved back to her home country in the middle of the pandemic. She highlights how feelings of loneliness can be present, despite there being people around, if they are felt to not be the “people you want to see”, with a deeper emotional connection missing:

I moved in with my boyfriend just for Christmas [2020] and then I had to stay in Germany because I couldn't go back to Scotland and I felt quite lonely because of the town I live in. It's like... it's not my hometown, it's not even close to my hometown. None of my friends live here and the only person I really know is my boyfriend and his friends who I get on with but they're his friends... I got really unhappy because I was feeling that I didn't have contact with my friends even though there were loads of people who are new I could just call or even see, but they weren't really my friends or my contacts which I wanted to see. And I am going to move back as soon as possible so I decided it wouldn't be fair to anybody to, like you couldn't really meet new people that's one thing, and I didn't really want to form any close connections to new people because I was going to leave at some point anyway. (Johanna)

Johanna's reasoning regarding deciding not to form close connections with new people because she intended leaving as soon as possible is reminiscent of Simmel's (1964) *Stranger*, about whom he notes that people do not tend to invest deeply and emotionally into strangers as they are seen not to have overcome “the freedom of coming and going” (p. 402). Being perceived as a stranger by those around them, Loh (2003) notes, can make it difficult for international students to develop strong and long-lasting relationships in their host country. What is notable in Johanna's comment, however, is that she perceives herself as being the stranger; choosing not to invest in these relationships because she knows she will be returning to where she geographically wants to be. This experience was shared amongst participants, and – notably – predominately by those who had left Scotland and returned to their home country. Thereby, the findings of this study illustrates that the felt label of the stranger does not solely feature in international students' experiences of how others perceive them, but also how they perceive themselves.

Sense of Home and Family

Central to many participants' comments was that of the notion of home. Informing the findings is Jackson's (1995, p. 148) definition of home as “grounded less in a place and more in the activity that occurs in the place”; home

is an active process, that is (re-)created and enacted. Equally, the participants repeatedly spoke about the notion of family in relation to home which is similarly reflected in the discussion.

International students had already experienced instances of rupture and transition before the pandemic; in most cases to a greater extent than their domestic peers. Not only had they experienced the transition into Higher Education, but also into a different country, often with a different culture and language, that required them to leave their support network behind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this became further amplified due to lockdown, other related restrictions and general uncertainty. To some degree, these multiple periods of transition and rupture had already made international students feel a sense of strength and resilience – in that sense, as Holbraad et al. (2019, p. 1), notes “ruptures are moments at which value emerges through a break with something”. For example, for many of them feelings of loneliness and social isolation were not new:

As an international student, feelings of loneliness are somewhat familiar but they have increased this year. I have been at home with my family during most of the pandemic but have felt very lonely because of the distance to my ‘chosen family’ and home in Scotland. (Questionnaire Comment)

This student’s comment illustrates that the notion of family appears to take on a different meaning for international students as opposed to domestic students, in that it refers to something that exists outside of tradition and nostalgia. Indeed, the student’s mention of their chosen family (Duran & Pérez, 2018) is particularly notable.

Freja – who went back to stay with her family in her home country early on in the pandemic – expands on this notion, in speaking of the investment that she’s made in her chosen family. Chosen families have been highlighted as often providing “similar, if not more, support than what is traditionally expected of related family members” (Duran & Pérez, 2018, p. 69). Suddenly leaving this chosen family, then, can generate a sense of personal rupture, as it cannot be replaced by related family. Freja discussed returning to her family home and managing her new sense of self within old family structures:

You invest so much in the people that you connect with at uni, like because it's like you really invest and sort of building your chosen family and home, just to be really cheesy (...) It felt very lonely being back home even though I was surrounded by people; just see the fact that they couldn't really relate to my issues and I couldn't really relate to theirs either (...) When you then go back to living with someone... you know my political opinions have changed, they're way stronger and they don't necessarily match those of my family and then obviously that they didn't witness that change happen (...) So that was a bit difficult to navigate. At one point I just had to choose to be like, ‘OK, I'm not leaving here anytime soon, so in order to keep the peace just you know, let it let it go,

just be whoever I was and am on the inside, let that just be' and have an internal voice and then just brush over the things because it's it wasn't worth going into. (Freja)

Many of the experiences summed up by Freja in this rich extract were shared amongst several participants. Notably, her comment aligns with those who have discussed that some international students experience a “regression to a former self” when they return to their home country (Loh, 2003, p. 66). However, as opposed to previous research on returning home, or being a ‘Homecomer’ (Schutz, 1945), international students in this case returned home unexpectedly; it was not an end to their international study experience – they were in the middle of it. Being a Homecomer involves returning home, not as an exact copy of the person they were when they left because of the “irreversibility of inner time” (Schutz, 1945, p. 114). Thereby, as previous studies have found (Loh, 2003; Diamanti & Nikolaou, 2021), Freja’s feeling that the discrepancy between whom she and her family perceive her to be is different, as they did not see that change happen; a further instance of rupture, in this case of identity.

Relatedly, Riemann (2022) noted that some of their participants found it “suffocating” to be back in their old and familiar structures when returning to their home country after spending time away. Like Freja, they found that some people tried to mould them back into the person they had been before they left and that they were unwilling to accept how much they had changed during their time abroad (Riemann, 2022). Furthermore, as Freja was still – although from a distance – an international student and not someone who *had been* an international student, she and other international students had to manage these two ‘selves’ and worlds simultaneously.

Freja also reflected on the notion of home having changed when she returned to Scotland in the summer of 2021, with the change being attributed to people no longer being there which made it home:

It's been a bit strange even coming back... like transitioning back into being in Scotland again, 'cause quite a few of my friends have moved back to their countries during the summer. So that's a bit strange being back sort of 'home', in like citation marks, if you can call it that... it's really changed and it's still... really weird. It's more isolated than it used to be. (Freja)

With people who were part of her support network having left, then, altered her feeling of home. These changes occur to most students at the end of their time at university but experiencing it before such an end because of a sudden societal rupture, in a context where it is more difficult than usual to build new relationships, can be a significant strain on students’ sense of belonging. Hence, the participants accounts illustrate the layered-ness of the experience of rupture and its impact on personal relationships. Not solely did the pandemic change the nature of these relationships and how they communicated with others (Thorson et al., 2022), it also required of them to continuously reconsider what, where and who was felt as being ‘home’ (Diamanti & Nikolaou, 2021) and to manage

experiences of disconnection if, or when, they were waiting to return home – be that in their home country or in Scotland.

Staying or Leaving the Country

Participants who remained in Scotland highlighted how their sense of normalcy had been disrupted with regards to the possibility of soothing such feelings by visiting their families, which was more widely possible in the past. Even, as Vasileiou et al.'s (2019) participants noted, the knowledge that they could do so if they wished was draped in uncertainty of when it would next be possible (Thorson et al., 2022). International travel was restricted in Scotland, to varying extents, until March 2022 (Scottish Government, 2022) and concurrent warnings of the risks of travelling abroad, being in quarantine when getting there and coming back, as well as an awareness that entry restrictions to the UK and Scotland could change with little warning – making international travel risky for international students (Mbous et al., 2022). Diana, who stayed in Scotland during the pandemic, reflected on the new risk attached to seeing her family:

I do miss my family and almost more than before because then I knew I could always go and see them, which I can't do now. And even if they were to say that all the restrictions were gone now, I don't feel confident to go on a plane with lots of people or to be travel for 4-5 hours or stuck in the airports – for myself or for them [her family]. (Diana)

The awareness of the risk of potentially contracting the virus herself, but also the possibility of passing it on to her family if she were to see them was mirrored by other international students during the pandemic (Diamanti & Nikolaou, 2021; Mbous et al., 2022). Getting to, and from, their family is more complex for international students, which was heightened by COVID-19. Given the different restrictions across countries and the variety of public spaces (airports, public transport, test centres) in which students had to spend time to travel during a time of social distancing, and messages about avoiding such spaces played a significant role in their decision to stay in Scotland.

Alexandra – who also remained in Scotland during the pandemic – added to Diana's point about the new hurdles regarding travel, emphasising the financial ramifications of COVID-19 rules and restrictions:

For me I really struggle with, like, why are you [the Government] opening up travel to countries that bring you money as a government but you're not thinking about the people who don't have family here? In the beginning it [lockdown] was okay, I've been away from my family for long periods of time before [...] but I'm now in this position where I'm going: 'when can I go back home?'. There's now talk about all this 'you won't have to quarantine anymore!'. That's all fine but you still need [PCR travel] tests. I can't afford the tests and that's really getting to me and that's really impacting my feeling of loneliness because I feel isolated from my family and I feel isolated from the connections I have

in Germany and I feel isolated from even being able to go when it should be possible. That's really adding to my loneliness and to my feeling of... I just don't know when it's going to be possible. (Alexandra)

For Alexandra, despite having spent long periods apart from her family in Germany before the uncertainty that surrounded the possibility of her seeing them again added to her sense of loneliness, isolation and disconnection, much like it did for Diana. However, her experience is also underpinned by frustration, of feeling deprioritised (or overlooked) with regards to the different reasons behind travelling abroad, as well as with the additional costs that made international travel possible for some, but not others. International study is associated with high financial costs (Study.eu, 2020) – even for EU students who did not use to have to pay tuition fees to study at undergraduate level in Scotland – but these were significantly increased in the pandemic and thus radically changed the ‘normal’ estimated costs related to travelling to their home countries.

Moreover, Steffi – who returned to her home country in the middle of the pandemic – reflected on her reasoning regarding leaving or staying in Scotland:

During reading week [mid-October] I went back home due to some personal reasons and then it was getting really hard to find flights to come back and so I was like ‘oh well, what am I gonna do? Am I risking spending, you know, Christmas apart from my family if I go, or do I stay here and cancel my room at university and just stay with my family until better times?’. That was quite a hard decision for me because I was really happy at uni. I had a few friends in my course and we kind of made do of the situation (...) I think that I would have felt very lonely if I had stayed at uni over the Christmas period, but being very close with my family I didn't really feel isolated at all. But I would have liked to go back to Scotland earlier, I moved back in April. (Steffi)

Steffi's experience of choosing between staying or leaving her country of study is mirrored by other international students during the pandemic; particularly the uncertainty regarding when they would be able to return if they did choose to leave (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022).

What these accounts of constraints related to international travel tell us about these students' feelings of loneliness and social isolation is how imposed, changed and constantly changing constraints and restrictions can affect their sense of control over their lives, their relationships and connections. The sense of rupture, a complete change of normalcy caused by the pandemic, affect all students – including international students unequally; and made it impossible for some to return to their families if they would have wished to do so.

CONCLUSION

This study aligns with existing research that emphasises the common experience of loneliness and social isolation amongst international students but couches these within a broader existential experience of rupture. The use of this prism as a

conceptual framework may be applied to studies in different (inter)national contexts. Our findings contribute to this body of research by further enhancing the awareness of tangible factors and experiences, on both personal and emotional (e.g., ‘sense of home’) and structural (e.g., increased costs related to travel) levels, that contributed to such feelings amongst international students in Scotland during COVID-19. Analysing the data through the prism of rupture provided further insights into how the corrosion and discontinuity of normalcy affected this specific student group, and how messages of “we are in this together” – for some international students – were perceived as generating an increased sense of isolation due to the unique challenges that they were facing. The awareness of risks and the financial elements that contributed to some international students’ feelings of loneliness and social isolation in this context must not be undermined. As such, we highlight the need to raise awareness of the unique experiences of this student group.

Furthermore, with relationships, and opportunities to development being suddenly disrupted due to the pandemic, some international students found themselves on the periphery of their developing social groups and support networks. Some made the decision not to invest in making new relationships as they were planning on leaving as soon as it was possible for them to do so, whereas others put “themselves” on pause to keep the peace after having returned to their family home. The experiences of loneliness and social isolation that arose out of these experiences were further heightened by the sudden loss of social interaction and routines on both a macro and micro scale by COVID-19 social restrictions.

We also draw attention to how the study reveals both the vulnerability and resilience of international students during the time of both societal and personal rupture. Their reorientation of themselves in line with new developments and changes may – as some noted – be helped by international students having gone through multiple periods of transition and disruption when enrolling at a university in a new country. It would be of benefit for universities as well as for current and future international students to better understand the specific challenges faced at a general, national and institutional level and utilise the experiences and strategies that emerge through facing such challenges and, thus, to develop interventions and support in collaboration with international students.

Future research may explore the experiences of loneliness and social isolation of international students during COVID-19 in different national and cultural contexts to contribute to a more extensive and in-depth understanding of such experiences in the Higher Education sector. We also urge further studies explore international students’ coping mechanisms to provide better insight into the agency of students and their ability to navigate times characterised by rupture.

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