

# *Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study*

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*In a study of international student security, consisting of 200 intensive interviews with students, resident onshore in Australia, it was found that two thirds of the group had experienced problems of loneliness and/or isolation, especially in the early months. According to Weiss, students experience both personal loneliness because of the loss of contact with families and social loneliness because of the loss of networks. Both forms of loneliness are at times exacerbated by their experiences in institutional sites. The article discusses the coping mechanisms that students use. It identifies a third kind of loneliness experienced by international students, cultural loneliness, triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment. This can affect even students with adequate personal and social support. Thus, same-culture networks are often crucial for international students. Yet same-culture networks are not a universal panacea: They cannot substitute for adequate pastoral care by universities or ensure satisfactory engagement with local cultures, so some causes of cultural loneliness often remain. The article concludes that the creation of stronger bonds between international and local students in the educational setting, helping international students to remake their own cultural maps on their own terms, is key to a forward move on loneliness.*

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**Keywords:** *international students; social and economic security; loneliness; coping strategies; networks; cross-cultural relationships*

No man is an *Iland*,  
intire of it selfe;  
every man is a peece of the *Continent*,  
a part of the *maine*;  
if a Clod bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse . . .

*Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 12 No. 2, Summer 2008 148-180

DOI: 10.1177/1028315307299699

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any mans *death* diminishes *me*,  
because I am involved in *Mankind*;  
And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls;  
It tolls for *thee*.

—John Donne, from Meditation XVII, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

(Donne, original English)

## INTRODUCTION

Australia educates 9% of the world's cross-border tertiary students. In 2004, there were 228,555 international students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions, three quarters of them onshore in the southern continent. International students constituted 24.2% of all enrolled students and provided 15% of university revenues (Department of Employment, Science and Training, 2005; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005). These students are not simply enrollment units administered by universities, nor merely customers of a large-scale services export industry, nor members of a classroom; they are also human beings. And they are human beings whose global mobility is associated with distinctive opportunities and distinctive problems.

In crossing national borders for their education, these students leave their family and social networks and citizenship rights in the country of origin. As Grinberg and Grinberg (1989, p. 23) put it, in migration "one ceases to belong to the world one left behind, and does not yet belong to the world in which one has nearly arrived." Newly arrived international students suddenly find themselves in "relational deficit," if not social isolation, at a time when they need more than the usual support. They face a foreign language, study in a new setting, finances, accommodation, and day-to-day living problems, and they must negotiate an unfamiliar set of institutional rules. They often face issues of personal autonomy (Baker & Siryk, 1986) and the recreation of identity in the new setting. Often, the physical and cultural environment is very different, with new social customs and norms. International students must establish themselves as foreigners staying for a time, as neither inside nor outside. They must deal with unpredictable encounters, idiosyncratic communications, and problems of racial discrimination, largely on their own (Church, 1982). As this study will illustrate, personal loneliness, both routine and profound, is often endemic to the international student experience.

The main part of the literature on cross-border students is focused on their academic experiences and achievements. A lesser body of research attends to the circumstances of their lives, circumstances that are affected by a number of different agents—governments, educational institutions, civil organizations, family, networks of friends, and the students themselves. Yet these life circumstances are important

not only because of the potential to shape the possibilities and limits of academic learning but also because the day-to-day experiences of international students are passed along to their family and friends and so enter the formation of country and institutional reputations within the industry, with the potential to influence market choices (OECD, 2004). At the same time, and equally important, the human rights of these cross-border students are being shaped. There is much at stake in international student security and student loneliness.

## **The Study**

The research underlying this article was funded by the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements at Monash University, Australia.<sup>1</sup> The first author (Sawir) interviewed 200 international students from more than 30 different nations, at nine Australian institutions: the Universities of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sydney, New South Wales, Deakin, Victoria, and Swinburne, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and Central Queensland University. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in quiet locations for typically 30 to 50 min.

The interviews covered a range of areas touching on the social and economic security of international students—from finances, accommodation, and work to languages, networks, and family; to relations with authority; and to intercultural experiences and personal safety. Summative data from the study were released in April 2005 (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2005a, 2005b).<sup>2</sup> This is the first article focused on a discrete area of inquiry, loneliness, and isolation. Other articles are being prepared on student work, student finances, language use, cross-cultural relations, including experiences of racism and discrimination, and dealing with government and university authorities.

The universities aforementioned cooperated in the selection and self-selection of student interviewees and provided facilities (normally a room centrally located on the main campus site) in which the interviews took place. Each vice-chancellor granted permission for the conduct of the research on the grounds that the interviewees would together constitute a single pool of data that would not be disaggregated by institution or otherwise used for the purposes of comparing the performance of, and/or services of, each university to those of the others. In a highly sensitive market, in which comparative judgments have commercial implications, we would not have been able to gain access to student interviewees within the boundaries of the normal requirement for permission to research, unless we had given this condition. Consequently, the researchers did not study closely the particular mix of services provided by each institution or seek to relate the comments made in interviewees with the particular circumstances of the universities in question. No doubt this has led to some underidentification of the universities' services, including particular problems and weakness in those services.

Typically, universities provide support for international students that is intended to facilitate an optimal (from the point of view of the universities) academic and social adjustment. Before the commencement of their studies, international students in Australia normally attend an orientation program designed to familiarize them with the various support services and activities, including social and cultural activities, provided within the institution.<sup>3</sup> In reporting the results of what is a critical study, it is perhaps necessary<sup>4</sup> that we place on record our awareness that much of the assistance provided by Australian universities, in relation to both the educational program and their life circumstances, has the potential to modify the incidence of and the experiences of loneliness: For example, the provision of new arrival services and personal counseling, the structuring of social activities, and the support for student clubs and other networks. There is no doubt that in many individual cases, this assistance relieves or reduces experiences of loneliness and/or isolation, and we expect that without such assistance the incidence of loneliness as reported here would be higher, and many individual experiences more prolonged and deeply felt.

*Overall finding concerning loneliness.* All 200 student interviewees in the study were asked the same questions about problems of loneliness and isolation, as follows:

Q. Have you experienced periods of loneliness or isolation?

[If the answer is "yes"] Who do you turn to?

A total of 130 students (65%) answered "Yes" to the first question, 67% of women and 62% of men. Many expanded on their answers. Some who answered "no" also provided further data. Other questions in the study covered related areas including friendships, networks, and cross-cultural relations.

The article begins by discussing theorizations of loneliness and then discusses interviewees' answers to the questions about loneliness and isolation. The final section discusses the implications for universities and policy makers and for research.

## THEORIZATIONS OF LONELINESS

Loneliness is experienced by all human beings at some time in life. It is more likely to occur under circumstances such as prolonged absence from home or the loss of a significant other. Feelings of loneliness are like feelings of joy, hunger, and sorrow; they can be managed though never completely prevented (Rokach & Brock, 1998). Like all human experiences, it is never finally known to social science, but loneliness is open to observation, analysis, and reflexive strategies. The literature on loneliness is mostly in psychology and sociology. Psychological studies highlight personality as a predisposing factor. Sociological studies often suggest that loneliness

stem from deficits in social networks. A middle group of studies crosses both disciplinary terrains and takes in both types of explanation.

### **The Need to Belong**

“No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe” (Donne). In psychology, the need to belong is defined as the need to maintain a minimum quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships. Conversely, Weiss (1973) conceives loneliness as an *absence* of necessary relationships. Following Weiss, De Jong-Gierveld (1987) states that the lonely person faces an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of required social relationships (also Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984, p. 1313). If the need to belong is not satisfied, negative feelings are generated, including loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Weiss (1973) distinguishes emotional (i.e., personal) loneliness and social loneliness. Loneliness results from the absence of either intimate personal ties or social ties and social integration of a less intimate kind. The distinction between personal loneliness and social loneliness is useful but is not without ambiguities. For example, boyfriend/girlfriend sits on the border between the categories, and certain social or institutional relationships, such as pastoral care in education, can function as quasi-parental relationships.

*Emotional (personal) loneliness.* According to Weiss (1973), emotional loneliness results from the loss of or the lack of a truly intimate tie such as that with a spouse, lover, parent, or child. It is characterized by anxiety and apprehension. Emotional loneliness can be remedied by the installment of a satisfactory “attachment relationship.”

*Social loneliness and social networks.* Social loneliness is a lack of an engaging social network with peers who share or partly share one’s concerns or view of the world. Weiss (1973) noted that among other symptoms, social loneliness is characterized by boredom and a sense of exclusion. Osterman (2001, p. 327) remarks that “being accepted, included or welcomed leads to positive emotions such as happiness, elation, commitment and calm.” On the other hand, “being rejected, excluded or ignored leads to often intense negative feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy and loneliness.” The remedy is integration into an existing or newly formed social network. Weiss states the following:

Social networks provide a base for social activities, for outings and parties and get-togethers with people with whom one has much in common; they provide a pool of others among whom one can find companions for an evening’s conversation or for some portion of the daily round. Social isolation removes these gratifications; it very directly impoverishes life. (Weiss, 1973, p. 150)

Stokes (1985) explores statistically the relationship between social network variables and loneliness among undergraduate students. The social network variables include network size; network density—that is, the proportion of possible network members with whom the student has a connection; the proportions who are confidants and are relatives; and the frequency with which the student receives supportive actions. The variable that correlates most significantly with loneliness is density. Denser networks enhance the sense of belonging and reduce loneliness.

Green, Richardson, and Schatten-Jones (2001) examine factors affecting both personal and social loneliness using a slightly different set of network variables: size of network, closeness of members of the network, presence of partner and close (intimate) others, and network density. They find social loneliness is related to both the closeness of people in the social network and the number of persons, that is, quality and quantity. DiTommaso and Spinner (1997) find that integration into a social network is the best predictor of lower levels of social loneliness. What is crucial is close friends capable of providing meaningful personal advice rather than casual acquaintances.

### **Causes of Loneliness**

Numerous studies have tackled the causes of loneliness (Lunt, 1991; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Rokach, 1988, 1989; Stuewe-Portnoff, 1988). One set of explanations lies in external circumstances, in the fracturing of social networks and personal relationships. Rokach (1988) refers to “traumatic events” such as the loss of significant and intimate relationships through death of a spouse, divorce or breakup, or loss of a friend. Another cause is relocation, which may involve separation not just from intimate relationships but from most of a person’s social networks and support systems, resulting in “relational deficits” (Rokach, 1989).

Another set of explanations focuses on personality traits seen to exacerbate the potential for loneliness. Individuals may be inhibited from creating personal and social bonds by lack of social skills or communications capacity, physical disability, feelings of being unimportant, or fear of rejection. People very prone to loneliness are often shy, introverted, less willing to take social risks, and more anxious, depressed, and neurotic (Hojat, 1982; Peplau & Perlman, 1982, p. 9; Solano & Koester, 1989; Stokes, 1985). Language competence is one key factor, and much research links severe loneliness and low self-esteem (Hojat, 1982; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). According to Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmera-Aro, and Eronen (1997), people with high self-esteem are more popular than those with low self-esteem, assisting them to create meaningful relationships. Typically, extroverts are surrounded by large networks to which they feel close (Stokes, 1985). Paradoxically, those who appear more self-sufficient and less in need of others find it easier to attract others and to maintain successful relationships with them.

Peplau and Perlman (1982) noted that personal characteristics can contribute to loneliness by reducing the desire for relationships, by triggering behaviors that

result in unsatisfactory social interactions, and by leading the person to change his or her social relations. The experience of loneliness can trigger a withdrawal from social relations in an effort to contain the pain, reinforcing social isolation.

### **Loneliness and Individual Differences**

In contrast, with much of the literature, we suggest that not every lonely person has the “same” loneliness. The perception of loneliness, and the way people cope with it, vary among individuals and between cultural groups: not only by personality but also because of differing practices in relationships. Between two people in much the same circumstances, the incidence and intensity of loneliness can vary. In fact, one may feel lonely and the other not. This potential for variation takes on special importance in considering international students who come from many different nationalities, cultural and religious backgrounds, ages, and life circumstances.

*Age and loneliness.* According to Green et al. (2001), the negative correlation between loneliness and closeness to members of the network is more significant for older adults. The negative correlation with the number of contacts is more important for college students. Similarly, Stokes (1985) finds that the loneliness of college students can be addressed simply by increasing the size of their networks. We note that this finding may be culturally specific; for example, young people in some cultures may have greater need for close personal relationships than those from other cultures.

*Gender and loneliness.* There are contradictory findings regarding gender and loneliness. Weiss (1973) states that women are more apt to be lonely than men. Women are said to have lower self-esteem (Hojat, 1982), which given the association between loneliness and low self-esteem means they are more prone to loneliness. But Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980) find no gender differences in relation to loneliness, and Borys and Perlman (1985) argue that reported gender differences in loneliness result from men’s greater reluctance to disclose (and perhaps to acknowledge to themselves) socially undesirable feelings. Some also argue that women place a higher importance than men on relationships and are more strongly affected by deficiencies in them. Others findings are different again. Deniz (2005) concludes that loneliness levels are higher among male than female students, also confirmed by Ari and Hamarta (2000), because female students have better attachment “skills,” especially in forming and maintaining close dyadic social ties (Nurmi et al., 1997). Such gender differences might be themselves be subject to cultural differences.

*Cultural factors and loneliness.* Some sociological studies note that loneliness can be exacerbated by cultural values and norms relating to coupling and other aspects of relationships (Rokach, 1989). But there is a paucity of studies of cultural and cross-cultural aspects in relation to loneliness. Most studies focus on loneliness

in just one culture (Misra, 1999). This article makes a distinctive contribution in this area.

In the absence of multicultural studies, we depend on the larger field of research on cultural differences. Among Hofstede's (1998) five dimensions of variation in national cultures<sup>5</sup> is individualism/collectivism. Individualism versus collectivism refers to variations in the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. In collectivist cultures, the "basic survival unit" is the group (Hui, 1988), often constituted by an extended family including uncles, aunts, and grandparents, offering protection in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1998). Group members place a high value on close and supportive networks (Gudykunst, Nishida, & Schmidt, 1989) and actively share the lives of others in the group. Mutual support is important, particularly during unpleasant events (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Friendships in collectivist society are nonspecific and predetermined by stable social relationships (Hui, 1988). Triandis (1989) notes that desires to remain with parents and extended family are stronger in collectivist than individualist cultures. Correspondingly, collectivists will tend to suffer more deeply the absence of such relationships.

People from individualist cultures exhibit fewer skills of close interaction and are more emotionally detached, believing they can stand on their own (Hui, 1988).

The more individualistic a culture is, the more likely it is that a person blames themselves for their loneliness. Furthermore, social support network are likely to be weaker than in collectivist cultures . . . the degree of individualism mediates how satisfied one is with the situation, which in turn will influence how one responds and copes with it. (Misra, 1999, *Individualism and Loneliness*, para. 2)

## **Coping With Loneliness**

The strategies and resources people use in coping with loneliness, which vary among individuals and among cultural groups, are the object of much research (Cutrona, 1982; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982; Rokach, 1990; Rokach & Brock, 1998; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). We can identify three overlapping kinds of coping strategies: (a) strategies in which the lonely student works directly on himself or herself to self-manage loneliness; (b) strategies designed to augment social relationships or the capacity to engage in them; (c) strategies of seeking help, often of a professional or institutional kind, which can lead to either objective.

Andre (1991) refers to reflexive strategies of managing being alone as "positive solitude." Rokach and Brock (1998, p. 112) talk about promoting "individuality, creativity, and self-awareness by allowing the opportunity for contemplation, self-exploration, and insight." These moves can enhance self-esteem and help in coping with the pain of loneliness. On the other hand, some distance themselves further,



retreating into a closed inner self; this is sometimes associated with pathological behavioral toward self or others. More proactive strategies are to enter activities that provide adventure or other challenges or to pamper oneself via consumption.

Another strategy is connecting to religion and faith, gaining strength and inner peace (Rokach & Brock, 1998). Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) find that among participants who believed in God, those describing their relationship with God as a secure attachment are less lonely and depressed than those for whom it is insecure. Pergament (1990) suggests that God can be viewed as another member of the social network who, like other network members, can help in coping. Religious life also provides community and a sense of belongingness. Religion is one of a number of ways of promoting and augmenting social networks. The classic advice to lonely students is to search out a collaborative activity such as sport, or activity or service-oriented clubs and other associations of peers.

### **International Students and Loneliness**

What does the research tell us about the loneliness of international students? Like other temporary or permanent migrants, international students experience both personal and social loneliness. Many report a profound sense of loss and isolation, as well as anxiety, confusion, and disappointed expectations (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). Early feelings of loneliness are intense even for students in regular contact with people from their own city or culture. In most cases, this intensity diminishes in time, as students' expectations and patterns of life change and as they learn to cope to extend their social circles and make new kinds of friends. If this transformation does not occur, the intense loneliness becomes emotionally entrenched as social alienation (Moroi, 1986). This can become "extremely debilitating and related to a loss of motivation," resulting in academic attrition (Brennan, 1982, p. 271). Demir and Tarhan (2001, p. 113) find, in relation to adolescent students in Turkey, as the level of loneliness increased, academic achievement decreased. This finding is consistent with those of Brennan (1982) and Dobson, Campbell, and Dobson (1987). On the other hand, students with strong support networks exhibit better psychological and physiological well-being, particularly during periods of high stress (Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 1997). Good networks help students to feel supported and more in control.

The literature also reveals patterns in the type of support used by students when coping with emotional, social, and educational problems. When seeking help with emotional-social problems, students opt for parents, older friends, or other students; when seeking help with educational-vocational problems, they opt for faculty advisers, parents, or older friends (Leong & Sedlacek, 1986). Baloglu (2000) noted that friends are the most preferred source of help for international students, followed by parents and teachers; friendship networks provide the most important support systems. Studies find that student counseling services are underutilized (Baloglu, 2000; Jacob, 2001; Mori, 2000; Schweitzer, 1996; Snider, 2001) because of insufficient

funding to support a counseling service adequate to international students' needs, or unawareness of its existence, or concerns about trustfulness, problems of shame and loss of face, and other cultural issues.

Cultural factors affect international student loneliness in two distinct ways. First, many students find themselves missing their own cultural and linguistic setting, often intensely. This is an extreme version of social loneliness as defined by Weiss (1973): loss of contact with those who share one's concerns or view of the world. Second, many find themselves in cross-cultural relationships but at a lower level of empathy than same-culture relationships. Research in the English-language countries finds that many international students are disappointed by the underdevelopment of relationships with local students (e.g., in the United States: Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006).

*Mobility also creates new possibilities.* Lonely international students can also have advantages. Many, though not all, are free of career and child-rearing responsibilities. The student world is open, fluid, flexible, and cosmopolitan; its freedoms are alarming and attractive. Losing networks provides opportunities (as well as pressures) to enter new associations. Through their studies, and often their residence, they are in regular seeing distance of many other students and have broad opportunities for extracurricular activity and the "installing" of attachment relationships. If network density is a key factor in reducing loneliness, then students can quickly multiply their friendships. Against this, new relationships take time and effort, and in the early months, most international students are hard-pressed just to manage their course load and cope with basic communications. Many also work to cover the costs of study and living (Deumert et al., 2005a). Furthermore, simply expanding the density of networks may not be enough for those students whose deeper requirement is not for quantity but for quality of association, through intimacy and/or cultural fit in relationships. Intercultural and linguistic differences can be steep barriers to climb.

*Institutional sites of loneliness.* Weiss' (1973) distinction between emotional (personal) and social loneliness originates in two kinds of human relationship: in families and in social networks. These are not the only social sites in which people feel lonely. This study finds that international students are also affected by *institutional relationships*, including the exchange in classrooms, student-teacher relations, relations with university administrations, relations with government and other authorities. In institutional relationships, a sense of social and cultural embeddedness, of individual "fit" with the setting, is important. Some international students have a heightened sense of loneliness in institutional settings, especially when they are in difficulty, exacerbating personal or social loneliness. It can be worst for students who look to administrative or pedagogical relationships to fill the gaps in their personal or social relationships.

The article will now consider the findings from the 200 student interviews.

**Table 1** Self-Reported Problems With "Loneliness," by National Origin and Gender

Nation	Women			Men			People		
	Total Women	With Problems	%	Total Men	With Problems	%	Total People	With Problems	%
<i>Southeast Asia/Pacific</i>									
Indonesia	22	12	54	27	18	67	49	30	61
Malaysia	13	11	85	5	2	40	18	13	72
Singapore	7	7	100	4	4	100	11	11	100
Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam	3	1	33	3	2	67	6	3	50
Other SE Asia and Pacific <sup>a</sup>	5	4	80	1	1	100	6	5	83
<i>Northeast Asia</i>									
China	22	13	59	6	4	67	28	17	61
Hong Kong	5	3	60	0	0	0	5	3	60
Other East Asia <sup>b</sup>	3	3	100	6	4	67	9	7	78
<i>South Asia</i>									
India	4	2	50	17	10	59	21	12	57
Other South Asia	5	3	60	14	7	50	19	10	53
<i>Others</i>									
<i>Middle East/</i>									
North Africa	2	2	100	5	3	60	7	5	71
Other Africa	3	3	100	4	3	75	7	6	86
Europe	2	2	100	4	1	25	6	3	50
Canada/U.S./U.K.	3	0	0	2	2	100	5	2	40
Latin America	2	2	100	1	1	100	3	3	100
Total	101	68	67	99	62	62	200	130	65

a. Brunei, Thailand, and Papua New Guinea.

b. Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Macau.

## Q. HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED A PERIOD OF LONELINESS OR ISOLATION?

As noted in the Introduction, of the 200 students interviewed, 130 (65%) stated that yes, they had experienced loneliness or isolation in Australia. Whether due to a higher propensity to loneliness or to report it, the proportion among women students (67%) was slightly higher than among men (62%), as Table 1 shows.

Of the larger national student groupings, those with aforementioned average rates of loneliness were Malaysia (72%), Singapore (100%), and the small group from Other Africa (86%). We might expect that the highest incidence of loneliness would be among students from small national populations in Australia, but the

cases of students from Malaysia and Singapore conflict with this assumption. Data from the present study do not allow us to take further the potential differences between nations, in both the incidence of loneliness and the coping strategies used by students and other agencies to overcome loneliness and isolation. This is an interesting topic and worthy of further research (see Further Research).

As Table 1 shows, most students were from Asian nations, traditionally associated with collectivist cultures. This does not mean that every person from those nations shared the same outlook; some traces of "individualist" values were evident in interviews. However, the collectivist aspect does affect the responses and is referred to several times in the data that follow.

*Students' networks.* Other data from the 200 interviews allow us to summarize students' relationships and networks, comparing those who reported feelings of loneliness and isolation with those who did not. We might intuit that those reporting loneliness would be more likely to lack social networks. It is interesting to find that, as Table 2 shows, on the whole, those who reported loneliness or isolation had a *higher* incidence of networked relationships than those who did not. More of those reporting loneliness (60%) than those who did not report loneliness (51%) had close friends in Australia. More of those reporting loneliness had casual friendships with other international students (100%, compared with 76% among those not reporting loneliness) and casual friendships with local students (60%/51%) and also reported involvement in social organizations (56%/34%). The one exception to these patterns was that those reporting loneliness were less likely to have family or relatives close by, 28% as compared to 35%. In a sample of 200 students, these patterns are not conclusive, but they do suggest that there is not a simple correlation between loneliness and isolation. Networks do not necessarily eliminate loneliness. The absence of networks does not necessarily lead to loneliness. The majority enjoy networks, but the majority experience loneliness. Networks are desirable, but they are not a *universal* panacea for loneliness.

Perhaps one reason for these patterns is that the group of those who say that they are not lonely includes both those enjoying an active life among friends and associates and those who have come to terms with a degree of isolation or actually prefer it (see below). Second, it is not just the quantity of networked relationships that is important but the quality, including their cultural content. An international student might enjoy a broad pattern of networked relationships while still missing her or his familiar cultural setting and still face barriers and difficulties, such as communication problems. It is significant that 65% of those who had experienced loneliness or isolation had faced barriers in making friends across cultures, compared to 36% of the nonlonely. This might be one of the keys to unlocking the problem of loneliness and isolation, especially in the early months.

**Table 2**      **Composition of Students' Networks in Australia**

Networks and Associations Include	Lonely, N = 130		Not Lonely, N = 70	
	Number	%	Number	%
Immediate family/relatives	37	28	25	35
Close friends including boyfriends/girlfriends	79	60	36	51
Casual friends: other international students	131	100	54	76
Casual friends: local students	79	60	36	51
Social organizations	74	56	24	34
<i>Q. Are there significant barriers in making friends across cultures?</i>				
Yes	85	65	25	36
No	45	34	45	63

Note: Some students mentioned more than one association, so the total does not sum to 100%.

### The “Yes” Response (Those Experiencing Loneliness/Isolation)

*First experiences:* “We are in the very strange place.” In the early months, when the separation from family is raw and social networks in Australia are embryonic or nonexistent, many students have the sense of being “lost in a jungle”: a profound unfamiliarity extending from culture, language, and people to urban looks and smells, and strange administrative systems. Everything is new. Students are constantly uncertain about what to do and the resources able to help.

Yes definitely. . . . I didn't know that ISS (International Student Service) actually handles these matters. If I knew, I would have talked to people. The first three months were really hard. I'd walk around and say, awww . . . God, I feel so lonely. I can't hang around . . . I want to go home. I would usually call my friends or my parents back home. I spent a lot of money calling my friends. (male, 28, biochemistry, Indonesia)

Oh yes, even though I came with my family, the first year here was terrible. It took me very long to adapt. Maybe it's a new environment plus new faces, everything new. (female, 32, commerce, Singapore)

To compound the personal deficit and social deficit, many students experience a “culture deficit.” Some feel that their identities are continually being bombarded.

Yes. The first time I came here my family was still in Indonesia. We were still struggling to find house, nobody to help us. I feel at the time, apart from the family, we are in a very strange place, different culture; it was difficult to find help. All things make you very, very, strange at the time. (male, 31, community development, Indonesia)

**Table 3** Triggers of Loneliness, Interviews With 200 International Students, Australia 2003-2004**Total students interviewed = 200****Number of students answering "yes" to the question "Have you experienced a period of loneliness or isolation in Australia?" = 130 (65%)**

Triggers of Loneliness Nominated by Interviewees	Number of Lonely Students Who Mentioned This Trigger	% of the Students Interviewed
[No trigger(s) of loneliness specified] <sup>a</sup>	62	47
Personal (emotional) loneliness	46	35
Shock of the new culture	30	23
Obstacles to social networking	6	5
Difficulties in handling problems <sup>b</sup>	6	5
Personal characteristics of interviewee	3	2
Total students answering "yes"	130	100

Note: Some students mentioned more than one cause of loneliness, so percentages do not sum to 100.

a. The students were not specifically asked to identify the triggers of loneliness, but a majority of them provided sufficient data to allow the researchers to identify causes. No doubt, of the 47% that did not specify a trigger, many of them would have specified a trigger or triggers if they had been asked.

b. All but one of the specified problems were academic in nature.

The initial loneliness is deepened when students face settlement problems, such as prolonged difficulties in finding private rental accommodation, or have early bad experiences, such as this student who was robbed:

When I came here just three weeks I met a very big problem. At the time I lived with my home stay and her house was broken by someone. I lost my laptop, cash, and mobile. At that time I was very distressed. . . . I lost my passport, and I had to go to the Chinese Embassy to apply for a new one. . . . I had to do many things by myself. At the time I feel very lonely. I wanted to go back home as soon as possible. I didn't want to live in Australia anymore. (female, 23, international business, China)

## Causes of Loneliness

The students were not specifically asked to identify the causes of their loneliness, but the majority of them provided sufficient data in their replies to allow the researchers to identify causes. Among the students who specified causes, the main causes were the absence of intimate persons and lack of cultural fit. A smaller number referred to difficulties in securing social networks (Table 3).

*Personal loneliness:* "Dad I wanna go home." "The child-parent bond is the strongest human bond in a collectivist culture" (Triandis, 1989, p. 75). The loss of

close family (parents, spouses, children, and siblings), relatives, and friends affects students to varying degrees. Some find it very painful:

Yes, yes, oh, especially right at the beginning when I first got here. I didn't have anyone to talk to, that was the thing. It was really hard because I couldn't have contact with anybody. Initially I came all by myself. . . . Exactly who to approach, who to talk to, I had no clue. So I used to be on the phone everyday with my Dad, "I wanna go home." It's like every single day, I'll call my Dad and cry and cry on the phone . . . at the beginning, no, I didn't know or didn't have someone to go to, so there was a lot of loneliness and things like that. (female, 28, business, Zimbabwe)

The experience is more daunting for students who had left the "nest" for the first time. Students also miss their families more than usual when they fall ill and also at special family times such as Christmas.

When I first came here it's very lonely because it's my first experience of going into abroad and staying alone . . . and you know I got a small baby just 10 months old. This is very hard for me. (male, 35, law, Indonesia)

*Social loneliness and networking:* "She doesn't always understand." Many interviewees wanted to connect to people like themselves but found obstacles to social networking, such as incompatibilities of age or nationality and problems of language and communication. Others mentioned financial constraints to socializing and difficulties in breaking into other people's busy lives.

Not isolation, it's just lonely. Even though my sister has come, I still feel that. When I talk to her she doesn't always understand what I'm talking about because she's too young. Although she's around 18, we still have a generation gap. (female, 21, design, Hong Kong)

In fact it's hard because you come from different countries. If you have a lot of friends, so much less you have loneliness in this country. (male, 31, computing, China)

*Personal characteristics:* "I always feel like that." A few students ascribed their loneliness to their personal psychology. (Perhaps the fact that only a few linked their loneliness to their personal attributes is a sign that most interviewees were from collectivist cultures.) Some turned their "relational deficit" into "positive solitude." They liked being alone, or at least they accepted it. For others, their misery was compounded by a sense of personal inadequacy.

Yah, sometimes, maybe just because of my character. I always feel like that back home. It doesn't make any difference. (female, 24, international business, Indonesia)

*Loneliness in institutional settings:* "If I knew that I would be so isolated, maybe I would not have come." After initial settlement, several students mentioned feelings

of loneliness arising in their academic work and institutional relationships, sometimes triggered by those relationships. This was difficult when the students expected those relationships to be socially supportive and found that they were not and for those lacking personal and social backup when faced by educational or administrative difficulties.

When I moved to [name of university]. I was quite unhappy about my course. I was depressed. A lot of things had been building and I was getting really depressed and lonely and I felt like I was just alone and fighting this whole battle. (male, 26, business, Botswana)

Yes. . . . Sometimes in the school I feel lonely. Most people are Australians, and all are busy. They can't find time just say how are you or something like that. (male, 31, biology, Egypt)

One student assumed the PhD program would involve an active research culture. But it did not happen.

If I knew that I would be so isolated doing my PhD here, maybe I would not have come here. I chose to come to another country because I thought I would have more chance to attend conferences, express my ideas, take part in discussion groups. But when I came here I realized that I make a mistake. (female, 31, community development, Indonesia)

Without classes, PhD students lack the surrogate social network and the opportunities for genuine friendship that these provide. A degree of loneliness is inherent and can only be overcome if the university provides structured groupings.

Loneliness in my research . . . it's a different type of loneliness, let's say topic-related loneliness. I can't talk to anybody, not even to my supervisor, because it's a field no one really has worked in. I guess you don't go out and say look I am lonely can I talk to you, rather you search for company and then you talk. (male, 40, education, Germany)

Others have negative experiences in dealing with authorities and no one to share these with.

Yes. . . . Not often at university, but within university life, especially when I have to deal with immigration. Because there is no one to ask (for help). The International Students office or School of Graduate Studies always refers you back to the Immigration office, and when you have to deal with Immigration Office yourself, you feel like you are just a piece of paper. (female, 29, architecture, Indonesia)

### **Q. Who Do You Turn to in the Face of Loneliness?**

Most students (88%) who felt lonely or isolated turned to personal or social networks. A smaller group (10%) became immersed in activities, and 15% drew on personal resources. Some had more than one strategy (Table 4). The categories of



**Table 4 Copying Strategies of Lonely International Students****Total students = 200****Number of students answering "yes" to the question "Have you experienced a period of loneliness or isolation in Australia?" = 130 (65%)****Responses to the follow-up question "Who did you turn to?"**

		Total	%
<i>I turn to relationships in Australia</i>			
Family and relatives	Spouse, siblings, other relatives	13	10
	Boyfriend/girlfriend	2	2
	Subtotal	15	11
Friends	Subtotal	71	54
University staff	Supervisor/lecturer	5	4
	International office	2	2
	University counseling	4	3
	Subtotal	11	8
Landlord	Subtotal	1	1
	Total	98	75
<i>I turn to relationships in my home country</i>			
Family and relatives	Subtotal	45	34
Friends	Subtotal	12	9
	Total	57	44
<i>I use other coping strategies</i>			
Engage in an activity		13	10
Keep solitary		20	15
Grand total all responses		130	100

Note: Some students used more than one strategy, so the total does not sum to 100%. Note that there is some ambiguity between the categories "personal relationships" and "social networks." For example, close boyfriends/girlfriends can fall into either category.

support cited most often were friends in Australia (54% of the 130 lonely students mentioned this) and family and relatives back home (34%). For many of these temporary migrants, the link back to home remains very significant. Many international students in effect live in two different places. Institutional relationships, much less important in coping with loneliness (8%), divided evenly between academic staff and staff in student services.

## Sources of Support

*Personal support: "You just call home."* Those who did not have the comfort of parents, partners, siblings, or other relatives in Australia often called home, though this was cheaper for some than others.

**Table 5** Penetration of Information and Communication Technologies in Selected Asian Nations

	All Phone Subscribers Per 1,000 Population	Internet Use Per 1,000 Population	Broadband Penetration Per 1,000 Population
China	499	73	17
Indonesia	184	52	0.3
Philippines	446	58	0.3
Vietnam	131	71	n.a.
Thailand	537	112	0.2
Korea	1,303	656	248
Malaysia	766	392	10
Singapore	1,350	559	118

Source: World Bank (2006).

n.a. = Data not available from source.

Everybody's busy with their own life so you feel very, very lonely. You just call home. (male, 24, computing, India)

I mean there are some things that I would confide to friends here, but . . . I often call home, not only to my parents but often to close friends from home. It is cheap to call back to the US. (male, 24, international business, US)

It was noticeable that the interviewees were much more likely to refer to telephone communication (especially in relation to contact with parents) than the use of other communications technologies. There were some references to e-mail but none to more advanced technologies such as Voice over IP, chat programs with video connections, and so on. There were also few references to accessing home radio and TV through satellite or the Internet. Here an inhibiting factor was the relatively weak penetration of information and communication technologies in many of the Asian nations that provide international students in Australia (Table 5).

Some students found that although calling home in itself was easy to do, securing an emotional consensus and a shared approach to the loneliness problem was more difficult.

I don't want them to worry so much about me. I just stay in my room . . . sometimes I cry (out) and when I cry out, I feel better. (male, 21, business, Malaysia)

I never spoke to anyone. I never even told my parents about it, because they'll be extremely worried now that I am staying so far away. (female, 25, media and communication, India)

*Social networks:* "I felt better speaking the same language." Many students found that speaking their own language made them feel better.

I talked to other Indonesian community (members) here, some friends. I felt better speaking the same language. (male, 41, literacy, Indonesia)

But often the capacity of friends to provide social support is not unlimited.

I used to talk to a friend of mine, I'm pretty close to her, but maybe she's not a good listener. Then she wouldn't answer my phone call. (female, 26, computing, Russia)

Yes, yes. I was with my boyfriend at that time, but he couldn't help. I guess we both had the same problem and we kind of lost the ability to help each other. But you don't find him as someone you can talk to and help you. . . . I guess other people very probably (could) be a support but he just couldn't. He showed very clearly his selfishness in this very difficult situation. (female, 25, public health, China)

*University services: "I've been happy ever since."* One reason why few students drew on the support of university staff was that not all knew the services that were available, especially early in their stay.

We didn't have someone to talk to at that time. We didn't have any idea how the service work at the unit. (male, 31, community development, Indonesia)

For some, university services are an auxiliary to other supports. For others, they are the factor that makes the difference.

I don't mind seeing the counseling people if I have a problem. At that time I didn't really have some one who was really close to me, and I don't like talking about my personal problems. So I went to the counseling service. (female, 27, engineering, Indonesia)

Being the first child in my family, I was never one to talk about my problems and a lot of things had been building. I was getting really depressed and lonely, and I felt like I was just alone and fighting this whole battle. So I talked to this friend of mine, and then after that, I went to the counseling service and I talked to them. And then I thought, I need a change. So I changed my course, and I changed towns and I've been happy ever since. (male, 26, business, Botswana)

*Positive solitude: "I can manage this."* A number of students just coped on their own. Going into crowded places could help them forget their loneliness or they found it natural to keep things inside. Gender also affected it. Some male students saw coping in solitude as intrinsic to being a man, but no women saw it as essentially female.

I think I'm older, I can manage this. (male, 25, computing, China)

Because I am a man, I usually keep (my loneliness) to myself. If it gets bad, I usually talk with my friends, my close friends. (male, 28, business, Indonesia)

All the time. A lot of times, but . . . largely I'm an insecure person anyway. I think most females are, and I think everyone can say they've experienced periods of loneliness. (female, 26, medicine, Malaysia)

For one student, religious activity strengthened his sense of himself.

I talked to my family, I called them. Or read Qur'an. (male, 37, accounting, Egypt)

### **The “No” Response (Not Experiencing Loneliness/Isolation)**

A number of the students who said that they had never experienced loneliness or isolation went on to explain their answer.

*Starting off well: “I was so eager to explore the new world.”* Of the students who do not experience loneliness, many start very well. They are used to traveling, or being alone, or they are excited by the new personal freedoms. Typically, for these students in the study, cultural tensions were minimized or the cultural difference emerged as positive:

No. Because when I first came here, I was so eager to explore the new world, yeah. (male, 22, food science, Vietnam)

No loneliness, never. I love it here. I'm comfortable. You see the thing is, I fit in over here. I don't fit in, in India. I'm a feminist, ok, I'm a strong minded woman and in the India subcontinent, it is very difficult. Here I have the freedom to lead my own life and I am not expected to come home and . . . I don't have all the social pressures to deal with. I have my life. (female, 19, arts, India)

*No personal loneliness: “I have family here.”* Some avoid loneliness because they have family with them.

No. I came here with my siblings and settled in and made friends in the language school. (male, 21, engineering, Indonesia)

*Good social networks: “I was lucky to be in a college environment.”* Others like students in residence find ready-made social networks at hand or link up with other students from their own country.

There are a lot of Chinese students here; you can easily find friends. (female, 24, industrial relations, China)

The great thing about staying at college is that you don't get lonely, because your friends are always around. Yeah, boys and girls. (male, 20, business, Malaysia)

I think I was lucky to be in a college environment, because I'm not the only one who is new and lonely. There are other people out there, so I think when you are faced with that, there are always two things you can do. You can hide in your room and cry alone, or you can go out and meet people and talk to them, and say "hey, hello, how are you". . . and then you say "I'm sad and lonely," and they say "hey I'm sad and lonely too, let's talk, okay." That is how I developed one of my closest friendships here. A Pakistani friend, totally from the other side of the world. I'd never really heard of Pakistan, he's Muslim and – but we became really good friends and within a year we were the best of friends. (male, 24, arts, Singapore)

*Personal characteristics: "I've always been busy."* Some explained the absence of loneliness by saying that they were extroverted or had learned to be independent or were just too busy to think about it.

I've always been busy, so I haven't noticed to tell you the truth. The first year I came here I spent my first semester just doing my master's. I just worked hard, so it kept me busy. Then the next six months I engaged in being President (of the postgraduate student association). And that was that, my agenda filled up automatically. (male, 33, medicine, Spain)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

I think the biggest problems most international students face is that of loneliness, and I mean it really gets to the point of depression. Some of the people I know that I've met, it's really . . . they don't know what to do, they don't know who to go to, because they have come from countries where it is not acceptable to go and ask for help, you have to do it yourself. (male, 29, economics, India)

These results confirm the studies of international students summarized by Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, and Pisecco (2001), concerning the effects of losing family support, the role of social networks, and how unfamiliar cultural and linguistic settings exacerbate loneliness. Students who feel isolated tend to be less confident than their peers:

An individual's self-concept and self-esteem are validated by significant others who, in culturally designed ways, provide emotional and social support. Moving to a different culture suddenly deprives the individual of this support system . . . anxiety is a normal response in these situations and that it may range from minor annoyance to extreme pain . . . because they are in a new country facing an unfamiliar language and culture, international students are likely to experience a more difficult college transition than U.S. students and might also have a more difficult time seeking appropriate assistance. (Poyrazli et al., 2001, pp. 54-55)

This study also draws attention to certain issues underplayed in the literature, especially institutional relationships and some cross-cultural aspects of loneliness.

## Ambiguities of Networks

Among temporary cross-border migrants, the configuration of personal and social relationships can be unstable and volatile, especially early, as sojourners struggle to fill the gaps in their lives. As noted, from time to time, institutional settings may take on quasi-personal or quasi-social roles. Conversely, institutions sometimes expect that personal and family networks routinely take responsibility for student surveillance and pastoral care, including matters that might be seen to be in the domain of responsibility of the institution itself.

Here we will provide one example of the latter point, originating from outside the research for this study but illustrative of the theme of isolation and of what is at stake in assumptions about the role of informal networks.

On January 12, 2005, police in Australia's capital city of Canberra discovered the badly decomposed body of a 25-year-old Chinese student, Hong Jie Zhang (Steffi), who had been an international student at the nearby University of Canberra. Her body was in the flat for seven months before her death was discovered (Wikipedia, 2005). "Any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankind*," as Donne so powerfully stated the case for universal humanism and care. In principle, no Australian university would disagree. Given the legal framework governing international education in Australia, the extent of the University's responsibility for crisis management and final care might be contested, but its responsibility for ensuring that enrolled students attend the institution is clear-cut.

Yet when *The Australian* newspaper interviewed the vice-chancellor of the University of Canberra, Professor Roger Dean, "he was cautious in response to questions about whether the university should shoulder any responsibility for the failure to notice Hong's absence." He cited the failure of social networks. "The idea that nobody would have noticed her missing from that peer group or from the flat for so long is quite amazing and very worrying," he said (Illing, 2005).

It was assumed that Hong's social networks would fill any gap in university administration and pastoral care. But how well grounded was that assumption? The notion that institutional networks should provide a social ambience and support and the obverse notion that the responsibilities of social networks extend across the responsibilities of the institution both underline the ambiguous roles of social networks. Both assumptions are also problematic. Some students want the university to assume a larger social responsibility than it can effectively carry out. In relation to the aftermath of Hong's tragic death, the chief officer of the University of Canberra wanted to shed part of the core responsibilities of the university—by passing them to the uncertain management of personal and social networks, despite the potential lacunae.

It is true that people with strong support networks tend to exhibit better well-being and capacity to handle stress, as indicated by Sarason et al. (1997) and others. This study has found that most students prefer to seek support from friends rather than rely on the institutional support of the university, confirming Baloglu (2000).

In the first instance, this mostly means same-culture networks, which is what the vice-chancellor is referring to. Nevertheless, although such networks are crucial and must be supported and although they appeal to universities as being both cheap and culturally sensitive, they should not be seen as the repository for the university's own responsibilities. Social networks are voluntary and therefore erratic; they are incomplete and uneven in their coverage. They cannot provide every student with the necessary empathy, trust, and practical assistance.

Furthermore, transferring the pastoral burden to same-culture networks is a lazy strategy that allows the institution to go on without changing itself. At worst, operating on their own without strong international student engagement in local institutions, activities, and networks, same-culture networks function as ghettos that block the potential for a richer educational, social, and cultural experience.

*Implications for university services.* One set of implications is that friendly classrooms, competent administration, and sensitive student services are more significant for international students than for domestic students. It is essential that universities resource student servicing and classroom strategies adequate to help students with personal and social loneliness, especially in the early stages. In the absence of a formal regime of pastoral care as in New Zealand (Lewis, 2005), students rely on universities to do so voluntarily. Furthermore, in many cases, students should be better informed about the services already available to them, from the very beginning of their sojourn.

First, among these university services, none is more important than assistance with learning English, a vital ongoing condition of survival and academic success. Second, students should be supported in their personal and social relationships and in maintaining continuing contact with family and friends back home and developing social networks. Universities should promote mechanisms that trigger networking, such as student clubs and buddy systems. Another strategy of local bridging lies in forming relations with same-culture people outside the universities. In the present study, one interviewee suggested that universities might ask people living in the city of study, of the same national origin as the students, to meet with the students when they arrive and play an ongoing nurturing and mentoring role.

Universities could also conduct regular "network audits" reviewing the social supports available to each individual international student. It would be salutary to benchmark student services against the loneliness issue. How does each service contribute to modifying and solving loneliness problems? Are the academic staff and student-servicing staff fully sensitive to loneliness issues? Where are the gaps? What kind of students are the ones that often are not helped and why? For example, PhD students need attention because the isolated character of the project carries social costs, as testified in this study. Does the institution have collective radar capable of spotting emerging individual problems? How close to fail-safe is it?

However, these measures alone are not enough. They provide a more complete blanket of support but do not transform the cultural configuration in which loneliness occurs. The symptoms need to be tackled, but so do the deeper causes.

### **Loneliness and Cultural Difference**

We suggest that one deeper cause lies in the cross-cultural aspect of loneliness. It would be easy to conclude from our findings that international students “should adjust” better and quicker to the local culture and that universities should implement measures facilitating such more effective “adjustment.” This would not be new. It has often been said or implied. But “adjustment” is a one-way concept that begs the question of where obligation to adjust should fall. It assumes that the local cultural and educational environment is unchangeable. In doing so, it negates the rights of international students themselves and their potential to contribute.

If we expect sojourning students to set aside core elements of their identity when undertaking foreign study, we must recognize that this carries with it potentially severe individual, economic, and cultural costs. To put the problem bluntly, should they have to acquire not just English but an ideology of possessive individualism, and a reduced commitment to the extended family, to cope with being in nations like Australia? Should they have to drink alcohol to mix successfully with local students? As some interviewees noted, this is what some male international students, including Muslim students, are expected to do in Australia to demonstrate their credentials in adjusting and mixing (though it is more likely to be a social requirement in some places than in others). But even if it was reasonable, such an approach would be impractical. International students are often highly flexible in the face of the challenges they face, but few will adopt local values holus-bolus to minimize loneliness. And why should they? It is not a necessary condition for academic performance; it would imply that for every cultural gain, there must be a cultural loss; in some cases, it would be personally destructive.

*Cultural loneliness.* The present study confirms that loneliness is better understood when cultural variations and intercultural settings are taken into account. We suggest that to Weiss’ (1973) categories of emotional (personal) loneliness and social loneliness, a third category should be added: *cultural loneliness*. Cultural loneliness is triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment. The propensity to cultural loneliness explains why some students in this study, who have apparently adequate access to social networks and sometimes also have good personal backup, still report a continuing loneliness.

Q. Did you go to your wife, talk to your wife when you felt lonely?

A. Yes, I think so.



Q. Or a friend?

A. In fact it's hard because you come from different countries. (male, 31, computing, China)

In the face of this, nationally defined, international student organizations play an often crucial role as student networks. But these are not a universal panacea. Students from smaller national communities or nondominant ethnic and language groupings within a nation or students living in remote locations often lack access to such organizations. And national organizations cannot altogether compensate for the lacunae in cross-cultural relationships with local students and staff.

The findings of this study also suggest that Hofstede's (1998) distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures is powerful in explaining cultural loneliness. Most international students who study in Australia are from collectivist cultures, and in Australia, they encounter predominantly Western norms and values that emphasize individual achievement, competitiveness, and impersonal social relations (Triandis, 1995). Students often find an unaccustomed level of direct pressure on them as unsupported individuals, triggering a sense of exposure, and social bonds that appear more loose and detachable than the accustomed ties of family and locality. Cultural loneliness interacts with and reinforces personal and social loneliness.

In the search for substitutes,<sup>6</sup> many make friends among their national compatriots or other international students. A minority try to immerse themselves in the local culture. Many others approach relations with the locals more partially. Yet relations with locals might be the key to moving forward on loneliness. One of the strongest findings of the study was that there was a strong correlation between the incidence of loneliness and problems with cross-cultural relationships. Two thirds (65%) of the students who reported feelings of loneliness or isolation in Australia had faced barriers in making friends across cultures, compared to 36% of the nonlonely students. In other words, same-culture networks, however necessary, are not sufficient to overcome loneliness. This reinforces the point made earlier, that loneliness and isolation are not the same issue and that overcoming loneliness is not simply a matter of providing basic support structures, for example, in the form of same-culture associations; it goes to the wider question of engagement with mainstream local society.

They [international students] just interact with the same people. "Hang on, I've come to Australia, I want to meet somebody else. If I wanted to meet my own countrymen I would stay back in my country." So it's a question of how do you break down the barriers, how do you get people to interact? (male, 29, economics, India)

As noted, other items in the literature on international education confirm that international students often find relations with local students to be problematic and disappointing (Lee et al., 2006).

*Implications for universities.* Australian educational institutions and international students need to devise ways of better adjusting to and learning *from each other* while engaging with a more mixed and complex set of values. In this way, students experiencing cultural loneliness can begin to remake their own cultural maps so as to achieve a better fit with their new setting on their own terms. Here the single most important element in strategies of providing a better environment for international students is to improve relations with local students. If a stronger social bridge between international students and their local context is to be built, this is the place to build it.

The obstacles are formidable but not impossible. It is not simply a matter of the quantity of networking between locals and internationals. As noted, some theorizations of networking and loneliness suggest that the strength of the personal bonds within networks is also important. Students from individualist cultures have different assumptions about social bonds from those of students from collectivist cultures. This can be a barrier to forming cross-cultural friendships in depth. Even when international students have good relations or even friendships with local classmates, this does not necessarily constitute a satisfying bond. *We suggest that if they are to be assisted in bonding more effectively with international students, local students will need to become more open to and curious about the lives and values of international students, enabling them to learn more about the mores of collectivist relationships—*to the extent that they not only understand those values better but at least, to some extent, can practice those values when relating to international students. The task for universities is to provide conditions enabling local students to undergo a process of personal transformation that, if not equivalent to that experienced by international students, at least moves part of the way in the same direction. This is challenging.

Here we suggest that the creation of more successful educational engagements between international students and local students, *based on sharing and mutual respect* in a common learning setting, could reduce the initial sense of loss experienced by international students, shorten the period of anxiety and greatest difficulty, provide a starting point for social bonding, mitigate cultural shock, and quicken learning of conversational and academic English. It could reduce cultural loneliness and social loneliness at the same time. It could play a central role in satisfying the need of international students to belong, in what for many is a very different country. It could help those international students find a middle zone where they could engage with the local culture without abandoning what they know about themselves, enabling them to have a sense of belonging in both the nation of origin and the nation of education. It would also enable significant learning experiences for local students.

Although this article does not aim to provide a new set of pedagogic norms to enable such a change to come about (that project would require further investigation), we suggest that it would be fruitful to increase the use of small cross-cultural teams in learning and develop pedagogies that blend selected Western and Asian classroom

practices, or move between the different teaching and learning styles, and pedagogies that draw out in classroom discussion more of the content that international students have learned in their country of origin, before entering the country of education. A more sophisticated strategy of cultural interface based on mutual respect would explore the potential for bilingual education across both groups of students. Here the inhibiting factor is the largely monocultural character of public discourse and education in Australia, as in other English-speaking nations (except Canada).

Another strategy to enhance connections between international students and their social localities is to build involvement in community-based sporting clubs, activity groups, religious institutions, and the like, enabling international students to get to know Anglo-Australians and others. Universities can help by providing contacts. Local students can play a crucial enabling role.

### **Beyond the Universities**

The university cannot solve every problem of loneliness and isolation through its own efforts. Often its role is to provide conditions that enable others to do so. Furthermore, some students face issues that cannot be dealt with effectively by talking to family and friends but are also beyond the competence of the university. This applies particularly to issues that originate from within the university itself, where there might be some reluctance to act, for example, when the people who normally help international students are themselves the origin of the problem.

There should be some kind of organization where we can go and just talk it out with somebody. Because when I was three months here all alone and I was very sad, I really didn't know where to go. . . . I didn't want to come to my university. (female, 25, media and communication, India)

The New Zealand code of pastoral care provides for an appeals mechanism giving international students somewhere else to go (see Deumert et al., 2005a), but a point of last resort cannot effectively address day-to-day needs. Community-based international student-related organizations could play a vital role in filling the gap, provided that they are adequately resourced by the universities and/or the home governments and/or government of the nation of education.

### **Further Research**

The study suggests a number of avenues for further research.

The causes of and solutions to loneliness could be investigated by focusing on what happens to the parental bond among sojourners, the nature of and role of informal networks, and the conditions in which friendships are formed. The consequences of loneliness could also be better understood. One line of inquiry is the relationship between loneliness and academic achievement and failure.

The present study suggests that there is scope for more closely exploring national difference as a variable in relation to the incidence of loneliness, the type of loneliness, and the coping strategies used to overcome loneliness. For example, national difference might impinge on the experience of loneliness because of the kind of values and life practices of students (it could be hypothesized that students from collectivist cultures would feel the absence of strong group settings more keenly while also being more resourceful in banding together) and also because of differences in the organizational infrastructures and informal networks of the different national groupings in Australia. Although the present study asked only one question about loneliness, such research would need to explore the issue more thoroughly for these hypotheses to be tested.<sup>7</sup>

Another line of inquiry would be to compare the provision of international student services on campus with potential to affect the experience of loneliness (newly arrived assistance, counseling, crisis management, structured networks and group activities, activities designed to bring local students together with international students, etc.) with what students from those same universities are saying about their experiences of loneliness and about the services. As discussed above, this kind of comparison was not possible in the present study, but it might help in more closely identifying the techniques and systems with the potential to affect loneliness and isolation and the limits of those techniques and systems.

## NOTES

1. The research was part of a group of projects on cross-border global people mobility under the heading "Global People Markets and Social Protection."

2. This data release generated considerable public interest in Australia and led to the development and funding of a further research project on "The Social and Economic Protection of Cross-Border Students in the Global Education Market" (Nyland, Marginson, Ramia, & Gallagher, 2005-2007).

3. However, one survey in an institution indicates that international students are unable to make maximum use of those services: Half of the student respondents indicated that they were unaware of the particular services named in the survey (Schweitzer, 1996). This prompted the Western Australian Technology and Industry Advisory Council (Western Australia State Government, 2000) to recommend that the universities in that state expose their support services more vigorously.

4. We thank one of the referees for this suggestion.

5. Hofstede's (1998) other four dimensions are power distance, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation. These are judged to be less relevant to the data gathered in this study but might become more useful in a related study that investigated in more depth the relationship between experiences of loneliness and cultural difference (see *Loneliness and Cultural Difference*).

6. No doubt some girlfriend/boyfriend couplings have their origins in the loss of contact with family: Deniz (2005) finds, in relation to students in Turkey, that the loneliness levels of university students who have a romantic relationship were

found to be significantly lower than the loneliness levels of other students. However, none of the interviewees in the study being reported here, who had boyfriends/girlfriends, actually stated that their romantic relationships originated from a feeling of loneliness. Interviewees were not closely questioned on the topic of romantic relationships.

7. Other articles arising from the data set on which this article is based also explore cross-cultural issues, the subject of several interview questions.

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