Isolation and Vulnerability Report
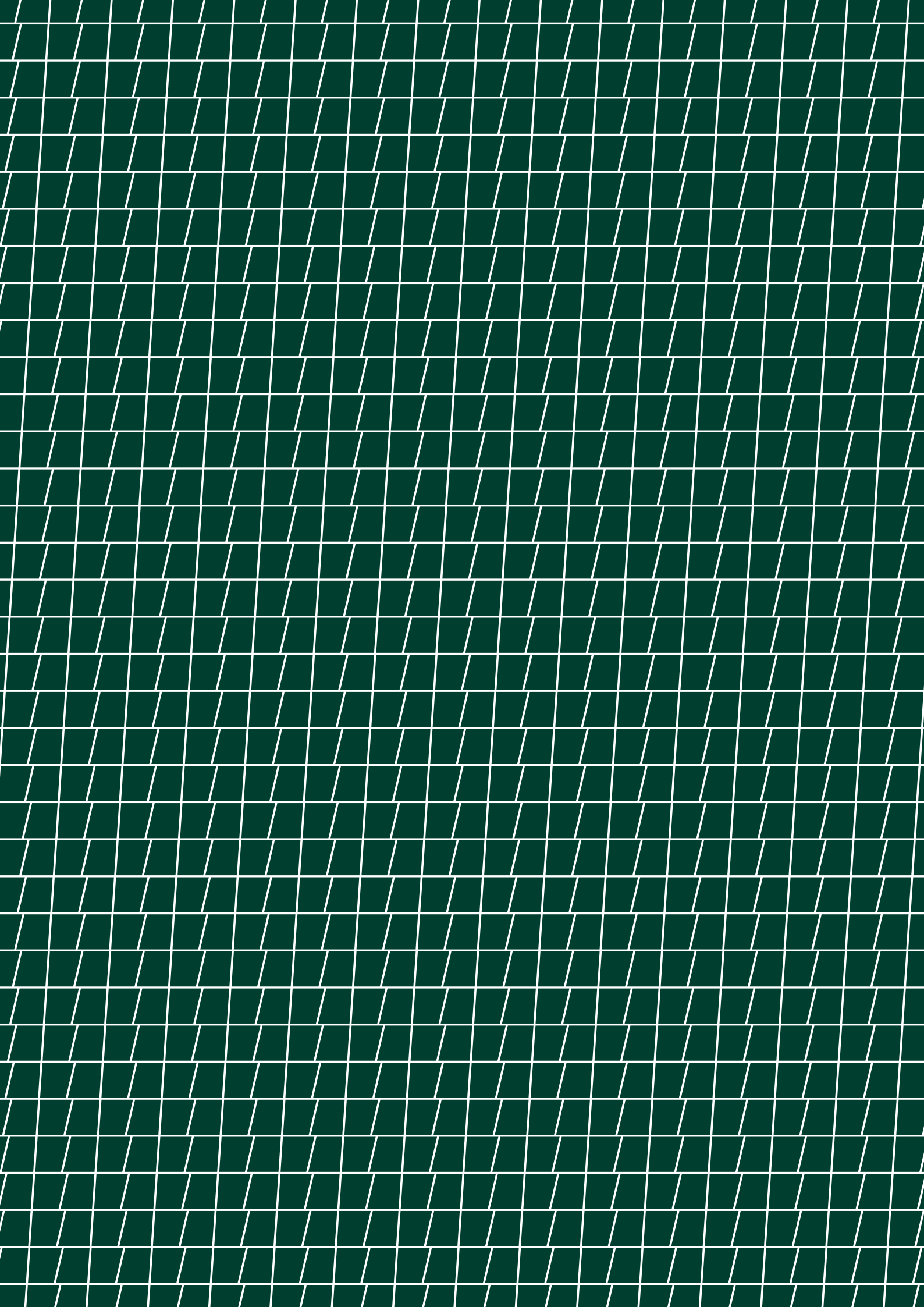
Researching the experiences of students of faith and belief in higher education

nus
national union of **students**

Contents

Foreword

Foreword

I am delighted to introduce *Isolation and Vulnerability Report Researching the experiences of students' of faith and belief in higher education* the first study of its kind regarding the experience of students of faith and belief in higher education.

This report is the only research NUS has commissioned looking specifically at the ways in which students of faith experience feelings of isolation or vulnerability on campus. The research has been funded by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, as part of NUS's Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief Project and forms part of a long standing commitment by NUS to representing the diversity of the student movement and experience. This is achieved by looking at the barriers certain groups, such as those of faith and belief, face affecting their active involvement in their education.

The research is the culmination of a longstanding awareness that the complicated interactions of faith and belief issues and the academic environment were producing experiences that were far from positive for students of faith and belief. Since 2009 NUS has been working on understanding the experiences of students of faith and belief and offering practical ways to solve the problems they face on campus and reflect the diversity of our movement. This piece of research forms a response to the various problems of social isolation students of faith and belief have reported to experiencing and the long standing issues students of faith may have entering the cross-cultural environment of education. Issues of faith and belief in many instances have been seen as a minor issue for some education institutions. Yet in light of significant political and social shifts faith and belief has been brought to the forefront of debates surrounding the cultural and social values students develop while studying at higher and further education institutions. As much of this research shows faith and belief inform and shape a students' experience of an institution thus can have lasting effects on both the attainment and development of the student and furthermore can significantly shape the policies, procedures and mission of and education institution . As institutions continue to drive for a varied student body, including

international students from culturally and religiously diverse background this research is a timely contribution to the debate regarding how to create a cohesive and integrated learning environment which encourages debate in a safe and inclusive space.

The findings from this report form a preliminary response to the ways in which to alleviate the isolation and vulnerability students of faith continue to experience. However I hope these findings will increase debate and creative ways of understanding the role faith and belief plays out in the student experience as well as providing context to the reasons which lie behind the difficulties students of faith and belief face regarding their educational and social environment on campus as well as the barriers they have in seeking support for these issues.

Colum McGuire, NUS Vice President Welfare

Executive summary

Introduction

This research presents the findings of a nationwide survey on students' experiences of isolation and vulnerability, with a particular focus on how students of faith and belief experience instances of isolation or vulnerability on campus. The report forms part of an ongoing project, the Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief Project. In particular the research looks at how students become isolated or vulnerable, the incidences of these occurrences, where students seek formal or informal support, and if there are significant barriers amongst certain groups of students in accessing these support services.

This research is primarily aimed at developing a more robust understanding of the ways in which students become isolated and vulnerable, from what places they access support, and if institutional support is effective at supporting students of faith and belief. In particular the research aims to look at the following:

- The types of mental distress students are experiencing and if these indicators contribute to feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

- Where students access support, and to what extent they make use of student support available at their institutions.

- The contributing academic, social and political factors that lead to students feeling isolated and/or vulnerable.

- To look at the gaps in student support, where staff feel more knowledge and training would be necessary.

- The research was gathered between November 2013 and March 2014 and consisted of two online surveys as well as a number of interviews. The first survey was conducted with students regarding their experience of isolation and vulnerability and where they seek support, this survey gained 1013 responses with a significant proportion of the sample, just over 80 per cent reporting as of faith or belief. The second survey was conducted with welfare, advice and pastoral staff in students' unions and institutions, two interviews were also conducted with chaplains in order to understand how support staff identify isolated students, intervention strategies and how staff support provide for students of faith and belief.

Research findings

Indicators of isolation and vulnerability

- The majority of respondents had experienced feelings of mental distress which could lead to isolation or vulnerability with stress (85 per cent), lack of energy or motivation (75 per cent) and feeling unhappy (63 per cent) the most common.

- In terms of why they had experienced these feelings of mental distress academic issues (84 per cent) and family and relationship problems were the most common (50 per cent).

- 1 in 10 respondents reported that issues of faith and belief were related to their feelings of mental distress.

Where students seek support when they feel isolated or vulnerable

- Most students know where to access support services if they needed them (79 per cent). A fifth of respondents did not know

- While most respondents knew where to access support, the majority would access it either through friends (92 per cent) or family (88 per cent).

- Half of respondents said they would seek support through their tutors before they would use advice centres at their institutions or students' unions or other forms of support.

- The majority of respondents indicated that they did not access professional support of any kind despite their issues of mental distress (61 per cent).

Isolation and vulnerability amongst students of faith and belief

Experiences of isolation and vulnerability

- The main feelings of mental distress amongst **Muslim students** were: stress, (75 per cent), lack of energy/motivation (66 per cent), and feeling unhappy (52 per cent).

- The most common feelings of mental distress amongst **Christian students** were stress (90 per cent), lack of energy or motivation (80 per cent) and feeling unhappy (69 per cent). Sizeable minorities of these students also experienced feelings of depression (45 per cent) and feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness (40 per cent).

- Broadly, **students of other faiths** experienced the same issues of mental distress as the overall sample. For example: stress (90 per cent), lack of motivation (74 per cent), while just over half reported having feelings of insomnia, depression, anger and hopelessness.

- The main reasons respondents reported for feeling mental distress from **Muslim students** were: academic issues (79 per cent), personal or family issues (44 per cent), career aspirations (36 per cent) and financial difficulties (31 per cent).

- The main reasons **Christian students** reported for feeling mental distress were academic issues (88 per cent), personal or family issues (54 per cent), career aspirations (41 per cent) and financial difficulties (33 per cent).

- Academic issues and family and personal problems were the most pertinent reasons **students of other faiths** had for these feelings. Less than 10 per cent of this group felt that their mental distress was down to issues of faith and belief.

Where students of faith seek support

- Most **Muslim students** (71 per cent) said they knew where to find support. However, almost third of respondents did not know where to seek support, significantly higher than the average of the entire survey (21 per cent).

- The majority of **Christian students** (84 per cent) said they knew where to seek support, 16 per cent reported that they did not.

- The overwhelming majority of **Muslim students** (78 per cent) said they did not seek professional support for their problems of mental distress. Of those that did, 8 per cent used a university advice centre, and 7 per cent used a students' union advice centre.

- The majority of **students of others faith** did seek professional support for their issues of mental distress (74 per cent). Of those that did, the advice centre was the most common place to turn to, comprising of 10 per cent of respondents.

- Just over two-thirds of **Christian students** would not seek professional support for problems of mental distress (69 per cent). Of those who do seek support, 14 per cent used the NHS and related services, 9 per cent used the advice centre at their institution, and 8 per cent used the counselling service at their institution.

- Just over 65 per cent of **Muslim students** had friends who had experienced stress, 45 per cent had lacked energy or motivation and 34 per cent had felt unhappy.

- Most **Christian students** reported that friends had disclosed experiences of stress (79 per cent), lack of energy (61 per cent), and feeling unhappy 69 per cent.

Isolation and vulnerability from a staff perspective

Identifying isolated students

- In terms of characteristics which respondents thought signified isolation and vulnerability, the following were the most associated: anxiety (91 per cent), feelings of hopelessness (91 per cent), feeling unhappy and depressed (81 per cent) and thoughts of self-harm (81 per cent).

- Behaviours seen as the most indicative of isolated and vulnerable students included: increased absence (90 per cent) and withdrawal from social activities (98 per cent).

- Most staff use past experience (44 per cent) and specialist knowledge, rather than seeing present trends as a means to identify isolated or vulnerable students.

Supporting students of faith and belief

- Of the faith and belief issues disclosed to staff the most prevalent were the following: conflict between faith and sexuality (49 per cent), prejudice or harassment due to faith (46 per cent) and crisis of faith (39 per cent).

- A large amount of respondents believed they were either adequately confident or very confident in dealing with issues of faith and belief (69 per cent).

- There are surges of seeking support about the following themes on campus: alcohol based events (56 per cent) and prayer space (38 per cent).

Recommendations and Next Steps

The following are some recommendations to be considered as response to some of the findings from this report. We have also put together some options for what proactive and positive next steps can be taken by students' union and institutions to begin to address some of the concerns raised in this report and start the process of bettering the experience of students of faith and belief.

1.   A joined up approach to services

This report has shown that institutions and students' union need to be more creative in their approaches to pastoral and professional support specifically because the points at which students access 'professional support' is consistently unclear. At a number of key intervention points the research found that students tend to in the first instance go to their peers and or tutors for support when facing difficulties even though the report had shown that the majority knew where to seek formal support services. This practice of turning to tutors or peers has inadvertently acted as barrier to students accessing support as part of the established formal structures. We recommend that:

A.   Institutions and students' unions should be looking in more detail at the demographic and cultural backgrounds of their students and exploring whether multi-faith pastoral services make a difference, in comparison to the traditional Anglican model of multi-faith space. What this will ensure is that collectively we are developing more bespoke pastoral services models that actually reflect the make-up and needs of the student bodies.

B.   NUS will create a working group led by students and involving representatives from students' unions, support staff and national student faith and belief organisations in order to better understand the needs of students of faith and belief in this area.

C.   Students' unions and institutions should carry out an 'impact assessment' on the current ways in which they market their services which will highlighted where improvements can be made

D.   Many institutions have already established pastoral support groups who meet regularly and are often made up of pastoral support and or faith adviser, students' union advisers and institutional student services staff we would recommend that either these groups should expand their membership to include representation from the student body and representatives of tutors from a staff perspective or develop a sub-group to capture the experience and voice of these to important groups.

2.   Building the capacity of tutor support

The report highlighted a significant support relationship between vulnerable and isolated students and tutors. This relationship needs further exploration specifically due to the ambiguity in the degree of pastoral support tutors should and do provide. There needs to be a robust assessment of whether tutors are in a position to signpost services adequately and their level of responsibility in offering pastoral support to students, and determining how knowledgeable tutors are on specific issues of faith and belief. We recommend that:

A.   As there is no national access or oversight into tutor provision at institution level, Students' Union in partnership with their institutions with relevant support from NUS should consider how best to run an internal audit either through a survey and or qualitative research to better understand the experiences of tutors and to capture anecdotal narrative as to types of issues that tutors find they are providing informal pastoral support for. The purpose of this will allow for the following:

i.   That the more formal pastoral support structures gain a better understanding of what students issues actually are. To collect further case studies in order to map the landscape of support in this area

ii. To understand the levels of confidence staff and how well equipped they feel to deal with faith and belief issues

iii. To identify the gaps in training and points at which NUS could provide bespoke training on these issues.

2. Building the capacity of peer support

Students of faith also have significant trouble in disclosure at any level. As the report findings have shown peers are the first point of contact for most students when they feel vulnerable and or isolated. They will take on a pastoral role when supporting friends the question is how best to respond to a practice which is so thoroughly embedded in all institutions. This is a difficult area to respond to and will also differ from institution to institution. Some recommendations include:

A. Providing bespoke training to those students who are already in roles of leadership and or are actively engaged with the students' union in order that these students as a starting point can signpost effectively to professional services.

B. Develop a clear line of reporting for non-engaged students that involve the formal pastoral support services

C. Review policy and procedures to ensure they are account for the nuances of faith and belief practices

3. Future research:

NUS acknowledges that this report is the starting point from which further research needs to be developed. We have identified the following three key areas where we feel we would benefit from additional research.

A. International students: Since a growing proportion of students at UK institutions are international students there is a necessity for an improvement in cultural awareness on campus. Therefore further research is needed into the experience of international students who define as students of faith and belief, and their experiences of isolation due to xenophobia and religious discrimination. The NUS International Students' Campaign will be developing a research project around xenophobia this year.

B. Support services staff: Further qualitative research needs to address the experience of wider support services and where they consider their key access points for isolated students to be, and to look in more detail at how smaller faith groups are supported amongst the student population.

C. Further education: Additional research needs to be carried out to address the experience of isolated and vulnerable students of faith in further education and the strategies used in further education to support these students. As further education support structures can be radically different to higher education support structures in would be valuable to explore how the transition from further education to higher education support operates and any gaps in provision

A joint response to this agenda from all key stakeholders including NUS will ensure that we continue to challenge ourselves and constantly critically reflect on our procedures, polices and cultural practices in order to improve the experience of students of faith and belief on our campuses and empower front services to respond to their needs affectively.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

NUS would like to extend our grateful thanks to all the students and students' union and university staff who took part in our online surveys and interviews. We would also like to thank the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills who have funded this report as part of the Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief Project and their ongoing support and enthusiasm for the project.

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- Zahra Latif, FE and Nations Project Officer (Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief)

- Natalie Peck, Communications Producer

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Introduction

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This research presents the findings of a nationwide survey on students' experiences of isolation and vulnerability, with a particular focus on how students of faith and belief experience instances of isolation or vulnerability on campus. The report forms part of an ongoing project, the Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief Project. In particular the research looks at how students become isolated or vulnerable, the incidences of these occurrences, where students seek formal or informal support, and if there are significant barriers amongst certain oups of students in accessing these support services.

In formulating this research it was considered that students might experience isolation in two distinct ways. Firstly, that universities and colleges could be considered as environments of high pressure and stress for individuals, especially in the academic and social sense. Secondly, within this environment there is an expectation of high individual autonomy. Furthermore, there is a commonly perceived necessity for a strong personal identity alongside intellectual confidence, which may belie an individual's previous experience in an academic setting and therefore exacerbate feelings of isolation. In a wider sense universities and colleges are also places which attempt to engender debate, meaning groups and individuals may feel isolated from their peers because they do not share similar views and moral stances which in some part define their identity. This is especially pertinent to those students who define as having a faith and feel that this faith informs on how they conduct themselves socially and morally.

The extent of isolation and vulnerability amongst students of faith

Students of faith and belief make up a significant proportion of the student population in the UK. On most campuses the right to express faith is well established via designated pastoral spaces, pastoral staff and support, as well as long-standing societies and umbrella student bodies. However, this often does not mean that students of faith are adequately represented on campus, or that the extra provisions students of faith need are understood.

Many institutions see faith and belief issues as lifestyle choices and build policies and practices as such. Contrarily, many students of faith will not understand their own experiences of faith in this way, as their belief system is fundamental to their personal identity. This is not to suggest that students of faith comprise a homogenous group, but an interplay of identity issues are framed by the belief systems they adhere to. While institutions need to benchmark how faith is practically incorporated into policies, they must also be aware that faith is as culturally embedded as any other issue of identity. Thus students of faith can feel as though their identity is being undermined, and this may exacerbate the need to emphasise faith as the defining aspect of their identity.

Introduction

Evidently the experiences of students of faith and belief are far from homogenous and individuals can have profoundly different interpretations and experiences depending on their cultural and social environment. Often this has not been reflected by the attitude and policies of institutions which often perceive all students of particular faith and belief groups to have similar needs The Campus Cohesion and Faith and Belief Project was in some part motivated by producing a positive response to a changing global and local agenda regarding faith and belief, and also motivated by a review of the ways in which NUS and the student movement engaged with students of faith and belief. Fundamentally the scope of the project and this research are part of an ongoing response by NUS to the dissatisfaction that students of faith and belief reported regarding their institutions. In particular, the range of pastoral and social support for students of faith and belief, alongside debate surrounding the larger cultural framework of institutions and how the experiences of students of faith fit into this.

This part of the project looks at a particular instance of the student experience and how far being a student of faith and belief can be an isolating experience. Asking what can be done to mitigate this? Considering that anecdotally students of faith had reported dissatisfaction with pastoral and social support, it was reasonable to assume that some felt they had nowhere to turn to in times of conflict or crisis at university. This report considers if this is a structural or cultural issue, and where intervention or access points might arise for students of faith to have a more positive experience of their institution's support services. It is important to note that often faith may not be the particular factor that causes an individual to become dissatisfied with their institution. Moreover, issues where support is sought will invariably be understood from a position of faith, thus there is an understandable demand for support services that reflect the importance of faith and belief. These issues are far from abstract and play out in practical situations on campus, for example the issue of student loans and how Muslim students are to access student support or issues of prayer space. As this is a preliminary study it is designed to open into further avenues of study and facilitate improved campus relations, and furthermore, to act as a benchmark of how students of all types of faith and belief are interacting with their institutions.

Background

Background

Isolation and vulnerability are broad terms both sociologically and in the context of mental health. Within a student environment they can mean something radically different from common interpretations attached to social interaction in the wider world.[i]

The related terms 'isolation' and 'vulnerability' are interchangeable. This is because they can be the result or the cause of a number of social and mental health issues, and often can be thought of as connected to a wider sense of alienation or marginality. Broadly speaking, social isolation can be defined as distancing psychologically or physically from one's desired network of necessary relationships with other people. Isolation should not be cast with the idea of solitude, which can be a beneficial and positive experience of reflection for an individual. This is perhaps necessary for the mental wellbeing of individual students, in order to thrive in an academic environment which makes demands of them intellectual and socially. Isolation becomes a problem when it is protracted – this is indicated by consistently erratic behaviour that can lead a student to be harmful to themselves or their peers – and is where students need robust support structures in place.

Most people will experience social isolation as some point in their lives, due to unavoidable events such as the loss of a loved one, or rejection in social situations. Where this becomes a longer term and endemic problem for an individual is when these elements begin to converge to engender consistent withdrawal of social interaction and increasingly erratic behaviour. The important thing to note is that there can be a number of different factors that culminate in feelings of isolation, and that behaviours attached to isolation may appear to be those of someone with high levels of social interaction. However, these relationships more often than not will be transient in character. Chronic feelings of loneliness despite social interaction are indicative of isolation. As the report 'The Lonely Society?' suggests, other mental health issues such as depression and stress can be exacerbated or have origins within feelings of isolation.[ii] Since prolonged solitariness can culminate in erratic behaviour and

an individual desperately attempting to find social interaction wherever possible meaning that they can be drawn to questionable relationships with individuals and groups who wish to exploit them.

In the university and college environment self-reliance is highly valued, encouraging intellectual self-confidence and emotional resilience. Colleges and universities are also places that are highly social environments which appear to be communal but often contain a number of subcultures that frequently require high degrees of confidence to navigate. However these are also spaces that a number of cultural practices meet, which can cause conflict or discomfort for students who feel they are not integrated with the mainstream social experience of an educational institution. This is a particular issue with students entering into higher education for the first time, especially if they are used to the wider pastoral and intellectual support available at school level.

Since isolation (and by extension vulnerability) is seen as something transitory and is often perceived as something that doesn't happen in the highly social environment of an educational institution those who have experienced isolation can be more vulnerable as their distress is overlooked. The major issue is that one can feel isolated regardless of peer groups or consistent interaction with peers simply because an individual feels they cannot express their individual or cultural opinions without fear of repercussion. An educational environment can be a difficult place to adapt, especially if an individual is prone to introspective traits.

Feelings of isolation and vulnerability can have lasting long-term physical and mental health problems which if left consistently hidden from diagnosis can leave a lasting detriment to formative development. Since the majority of students enter their institutions at a time of formative emotional and intellectual development it is imperative that institutions have a robust response to ensure these students are succeeding. A student who is experiencing feelings of isolation will invariably feel intellectually vulnerable and unable to defend their own ideas and cultural norms on campus. This will affect their academic performance and thus the retention and recruitment of students in the future.

Research into isolation has mainly focused on the experiences of those who have been directly ostracised from their peers and those who are hard to reach by mental health and counselling practitioners. What has not been explored in depth are the experiences of those such as students who have a high degree of support available to them but continue to have experiences of isolation and vulnerability.

Defining isolation, alleviating vulnerability

Previously there has not been a clear avenue of research into isolation and vulnerability issues amongst students generally let alone students of faith and belief specifically. However there have been a number of studies that tackle social isolation within a societal sense. The most useful working definition of the issues faced here is that of Jenny de Jong Gerveld:

"A situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. This includes situations in which a number of existing relationships is smaller than considered desirable or admissible or situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realised. Thus, loneliness is seen to involve the manner in which a person experiences and evaluates his or her isolation and lack of communication with other people." [iii]

Thus social isolation concerns the way in which the individual assesses the value of their relationships and the frequency by which an individual believes they have meaningful relationships. In the context of the university setting this means 'the benefits of belonging to a set of interlocking networks can lower the risks of social loneliness. Best friends can step in to function as confidants, and in doing so help alleviate emotional loneliness.' [iv]

The Mental Health Foundation's report 'The Lonely Society?' argues that social isolation and loneliness are common, but that, "People who are chronically lonely can get stuck in a loop of negative behaviour, and might push others away or seek transient contact." Isolation is difficult to define simply because, as the report makes clear, isolation and loneliness are subjective experiences based on self-assessment. "Our feelings of unhappiness and threat, as well as our difficulty in regulating our emotions, distort the way in which we perceive ourselves in relation to others." [v]

Background

Therefore, feelings of isolation can occur even when social interactions appear frequent and intimate. Furthermore there are interconnected issues of low self-esteem and desperation, which can facilitate feelings of depression or worthlessness – as well as lead to poor health – as individuals are unable to regulate their behaviour. This means individuals are less intuitive and more susceptible to any social grouping, regardless of the danger it poses to them

Biordi and Nicholson argue that belonging, related to connectedness, is the most important factor, and that disengagement from social relationships can be assessed in these terms. They also argue that isolation can occur – not just within networks of peers or families – but on a macro scale, when an individual feels alienated from a larger social or cultural structure and the organisations within in it, for example a university. Biordi and Nicholson suggest that alongside feelings that one does not belong, or is disconnected from a certain social structure; there are others such as boredom, apathy, despair, sadness and anger. Further to this, alienation is heavily linked to isolation, vulnerability and feelings of otherness, due to a significant life or socio-political event that can engender feelings of vulnerability. This means that cultural and societal stigma – or at the very least the perception of stigma – can isolate an individual from peer groups and social structures. If one is visibly or feels part of a minority, a perception that this difference goes unacknowledged can also culminate in feelings of isolation, and this is the situation many students of faith may find themselves in. [vi]

Therefore, a working definition of isolation suggests there can be a number of contributing and complicated factors that can result in detachment. Feelings of reclusiveness can result from internal and external factors, and are a result of a number of factors of socialisation. Fundamentally, isolation doesn't have to mean the dissipation of a peer group but rather a deeper sense of alienation from particular cultural or social norms.

In terms of strategies for dealing with the consequences of vulnerable and isolated people, prevention and intervention is key, the way in which intervention is arranged is multiple. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) identified befriending, mentoring and gatekeeping as major means of interventions. These strategies suggest that isolated individuals represent a gap in service provision and there are no particular statutory health services which can specifically support isolated people. [vii]

A review of services for older people by Age UK found that befriending services were the most effective at alleviating loneliness and isolation, as well as group support.[viii] The strategies most effective are those that identify small behaviour modifications and facilitate participation in already existing activities, which could be useful in the university setting. However, there is still a problem in identifying isolated individuals if they feel as though they cannot access mental health or health services. Since the preferable strategies can be described as pastoral and informal, previous research suggests that intervention strategies are based more on inclusivity and building networks of peer support. Consequently the roles of professional services are to signpost and facilitate peer support.

Methodology

Methodology

The methodology consisted of an online questionnaire that was distributed by the research agency YouthSight to a targeted sample of students from November 2013 to March 2014.

This sample was targeted at students in higher education institutions only, due to YouthSight's focus on that particular demographic. The sample was targeted to ensure there were a representative number of students who identified as of a faith or belief, with around 87 per cent of students reporting they were of a particular faith or belief. The majority of the sample identified as Christian (of any denomination) or Muslim. Due to the high representation of faith groups within the sample general reference will be made to students of faith. Students of faith and belief will be referred to as the pejorative term in relevant instances when discussing wider socio-cultural background and implications of the research.

There were 1013 valid responses to the survey. Responses were from Higher Education Institutions only. In terms of ethnicity, the highest proportion of respondents defined themselves as English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish, at 47 per cent. Followed by Indian, at 14 per cent, and Pakistani at 9 per cent. In terms of the gender split, 59 per cent of respondents defined as a woman, 39 per cent of respondents defined as a man, and 98 per cent of respondents had the same gender identity as they were assigned at birth. 90 per cent of respondents described themselves as heterosexual. 82 per cent of respondents reported to having no known disability. In terms of faith and belief, 43 per cent of respondents were Christian (including any Christian denomination), 26 per cent were Muslim, a further 7 per cent Hindu, 6 per cent Buddhist, 3 per cent, Sikh, 4 per cent agnostic and 2 per cent Jewish.

Our research with staff (including welfare, mental health and pastoral support staff) was designed to gauge where the intersections of their work and students of faith existed in the context of isolation and vulnerability, while also assessing access and exit points for students and the confidence of staff in supporting students of faith. This survey was promoted via NUS, AMOSSHE and Church of England networks and mailing lists. We also conducted interviews with two chaplains from two different institutions (one based in the west of England and the other in London). As there were only 84 complete responses from the staff survey, the results in this section are indicative and should be used as scope for further research rather than being conclusive.

Aims and Objectives

Aims and Objectives

This research is primarily aimed at developing a more robust understanding of the ways in which students become isolated and vulnerable and where and how they access support. Furthermore asking if institutional support is effective at supporting students of faith and belief. In particular the research aims to look at the following:

- The types of mental distress students are experiencing and if these are indicators of feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

- Where students access support, and to what extent they make use of student support available at their institutions in times of crisis

- The contributing academic, social and political factors that lead to students feeling isolated and/or vulnerable.

- To look at the gaps in student support, where staff feel more knowledge and training would be necessary.

Research findings

Research findings
Indicators of isolation and vulnerability

Background

Vulnerability is often a direct cause of social isolation. Isolation itself can be seen as the direct result of number extraneous personal and social factors. Considering that there a number of ways a person could be seen as isolated it was not useful to directly ask the sample about their feelings of isolation and of vulnerability. For instance, in the case of students individuals can feel a deep sense of alienation from their peers, even while partaking in seemingly 'normal' social behaviour.

Therefore we used a number of common indicators of mental distress in order to discern the types of feelings that may be expected in the transient, high-pressure environment of a campus; against those feelings that are indicative of long-term mental health problems.[ix]

The expectation was that, due to the social and physical environment and added personal responsibility, students would in general report periodic feelings of stress and motivational problems, and that this would derive from balancing academic pressure against broader personal relationship and family issues.

More serious indicators of long-term mental health problems would not figure as highly, but do indicate a convergence of feelings which culminate in an inability to cope with a high-pressure environment. Also of further interest to our research aims was to examine whether some students felt they had mental distress due to issues of faith.

Key findings

- The majority of respondents had experienced feelings of mental distress, with 85 per cent having experienced stress, 75 per cent having experienced lack of energy or motivation, and a further 63 per cent having experienced *feeling unhappy*. (Figure 1)

- Respondents indicated that the majority of their feelings of mental distress were down to academic issues. However, half of the respondents indicated their experiences of mental distress were due to *personal/family relationships*. (Figure 2)

- A sizeable minority also reported career aspirations and employment. Only 10 per cent of respondents reported that *issues of faith and belief* were related to their feelings of mental distress. (Figure 2)

- Half of respondents felt feelings of mental *distress sometimes*, while a fifth of respondents felt feelings of mental distress *often*. (Figure 3)

Figure 1 Whether related to your study or not, have you experienced any of the following since you started at your current place of study?
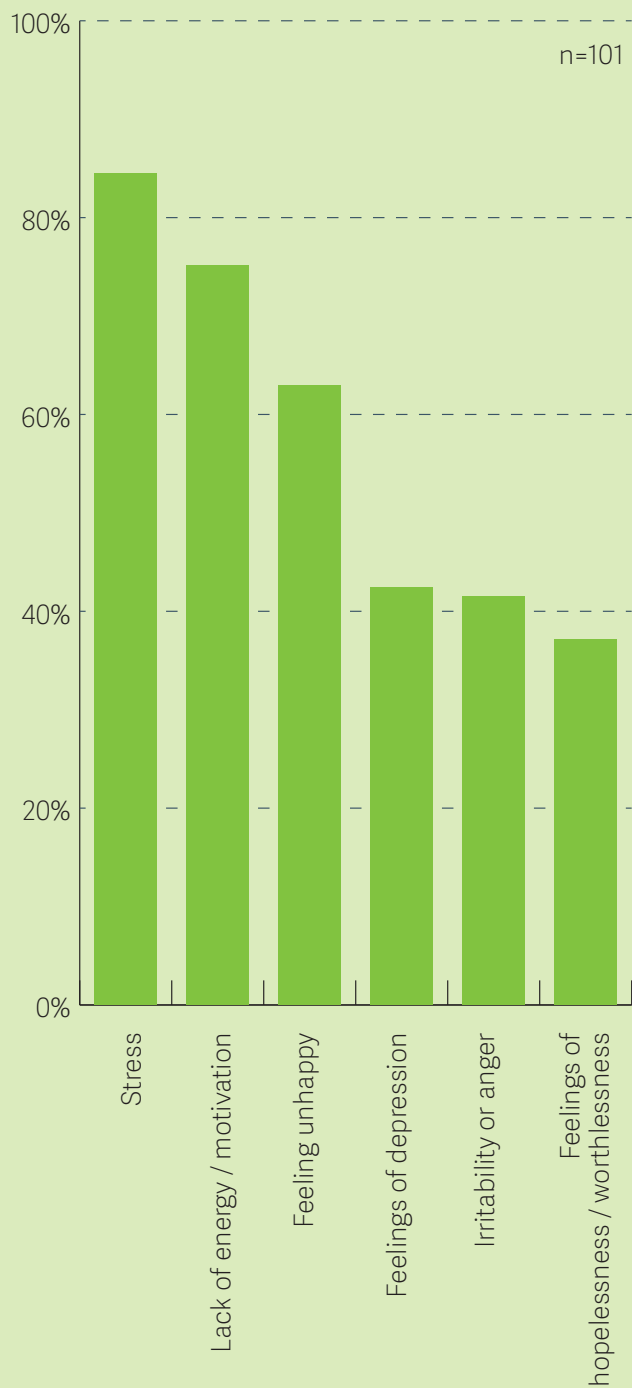
n=101

Stress — ~85%
Lack of energy / motivation — ~75%
Feeling unhappy — ~63%
Feelings of depression — ~42%
Irritability or anger — ~41%
Feelings of hopelessness / worthlessness — ~37%

Figure 2 What contributed to the feelings you indicated you had experienced?

n=946

Academic issues — ~84%
Personal / family relationship problems — ~50%
Career aspirations and employment — ~39%
Financial difficulties — ~32%
Homesickness — ~22%
Insensitivity of fellow students — ~18%
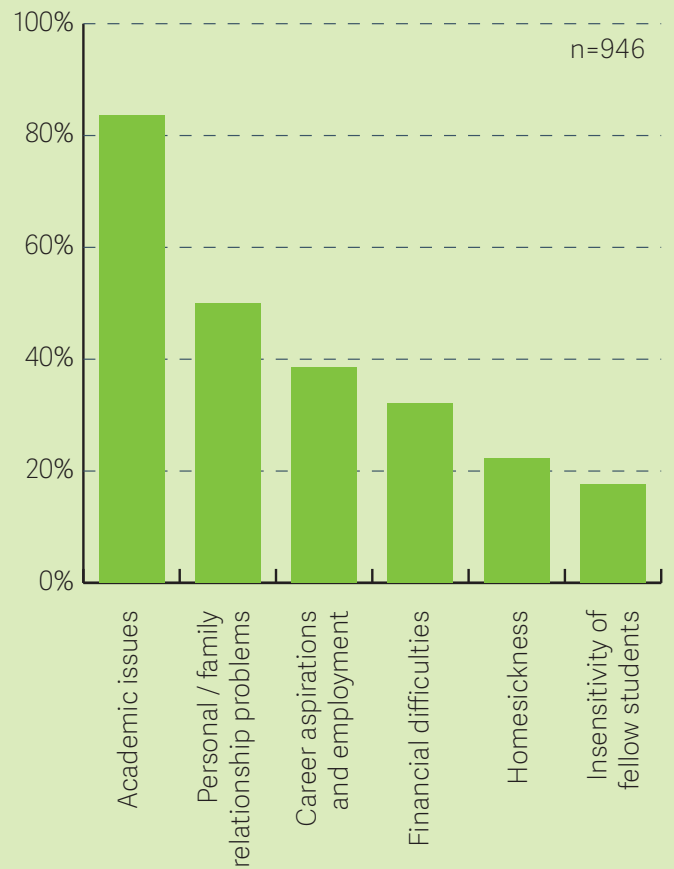
Figure 3 How often do you experience these feelings?

n=931

Sometimes — ~47%
Not very often — ~26%
Often — ~19%
Hardly ever — ~6%
All the time — ~1%
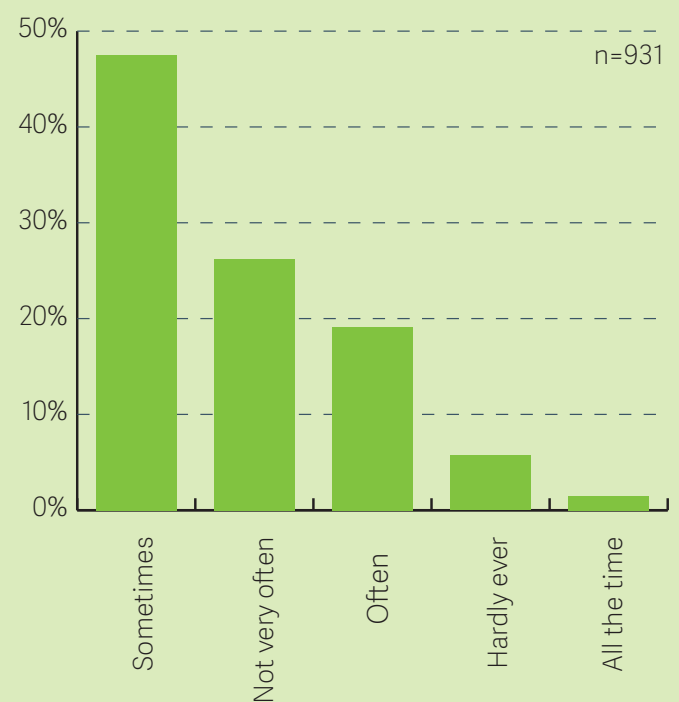
Commonality of mental distress

The results within this section suggest that issues of mental distress are common amongst students. However, of the issues reported, there was little indication that these were more than transient and due to the day-to-day pressures of being a student. The fact that just under half of respondents indicated they had these feelings *sometimes*, suggests that feelings of mental distress are periodical. This is also suggested by the reasons respondents indicated as to why they were experiencing mental distress. For instance, the majority of respondents indicated that academic issues were causing them mental distress. On a more personal level family problems, anxieties regarding employment, and financial activities also figured highly.

It is reasonable to assume that respondents had felt both a combination of feelings of mental distress and that the reasons for this converged on a number of personal and academic issues. In light of the alien environment, the enclosed nature of a campus and added level of personal responsibility studying brings, it is unsurprising that respondents reported issues of financial difficulty and anxiety due to career aspirations.

Indicators of vulnerability?

However, worryingly, one in five respondents reported to having feelings of mental distress occurring *often*, further suggesting that issues of mental distress – while periodical – are highly common amongst students. Of the factors that may lead to isolation and vulnerability a sizeable minority of respondents reported feelings of depression and/or worthlessness. Such conditions can culminate frequently in withdrawal from social or academic activity. This is further manifest in the fact that a sizeable minority reported homesickness was behind their feelings of mental distress, reinforcing the idea that an alien environment regardless of the physical location can exacerbate feelings of isolation. Also suggestive of this was the fact that 10 per cent reported faith issues as a reason for their feelings of mental distress. The results are indicative and there are a number of caveats to be aware of: the sample is indicative of students who were willing to be surveyed; it is unlikely that those who felt increasingly isolated would partake in such a study. Furthermore, often feelings of isolation and vulnerability are not at once obvious and do not always culminate in withdrawal from social situations.

However, the results give a clear indication that a variety of issues of mental distress affect students with more frequency than one would expect in the academic environment. There is simply no single reason for isolation but amongst this sample of students serious issues of mental distress had been experienced quite frequently suggesting if this were to continue they would feel increasingly vulnerable. The overarching point to be made is that these feelings are not sequential and a number of experiences of mental distress are experienced simultaneously. Often this does not have to be a serious issue for intervention especially if the student in question has a strong peer group.

Invariably the student environment is leading to high levels of periodic of stress and apathy. Having such variance of experience suggests that academic pressure and social pressure are exacerbated by formative experiences of alien personal and intellectual responsibility, which lead to feelings and experiences that may seem to the individual as if they cannot control their levels of stress, or academic expectation. Whether this is indicative of longer-term mental health issues or a common period of emotional and social development is unclear from the responses presented here. It does mean that there are a number of areas of experience that have the potential to create vulnerability amongst individual students. This is also a significant issue for students of faith because they navigate the same environment and development alongside questions of faith, which may exacerbate short-term feelings of alienation. Thus, while peer support is effective in periodic cases of stress or unhappiness, a wider system of support is desirable.

Where students seek support when they feel isolated or vulnerable

Background

Student support services vary from institution to institution due to the type and capacity of the institution; this is also true of how these services are promoted to the student body. The lines between is classed as formal and informal support aren't always clear. Students often do not access services in a systematic way, even in times of vulnerability when they need the most support. This is especially an issue for those who are familiar with the types of pastoral and emotional support received in further education or school, which may have focused on informal support from teaching staff rather than the types of holistic service offered in higher education.

There are basic formal support services, which all institutions are required to have, including counselling, and welfare advice. In terms of chaplaincy or faith advisory assistance there is an increasing trend of cutting frontline services, or of those services having to find alternative sources of funding to continue running. This was cited a number of times by the interviews we conducted with staff. Since, to some extent, there is a stigma around accessing formal support services (due to a perceived stigma surrounding mental health problems), pastoral support provides a more informal space in which similar things can be achieved thus the relationship between support services such as these is symbiotic. In terms of access to services, the use of these services is not consistent in the way external services for problems of mental health would be. The majority of support services act as a point of drop-in, referral and as signposting to other services for more complex cases.

Furthermore, while outreach work does exist it is unlikely that it would function any further than to signpost the available services at the institution in question. While the majority of institutions see support services of this type as vital – specifically in order to improve retention and the academic results of

students – this does not mean students themselves know what to access certain services for. Thus, informal support takes on an increasing importance to a student's overall mental welfare. It must be noted also that many students will not access support services even with issues of mental distress, isolation or vulnerability if they have a strong peer support unit. However, this does not mean that support services are only used in crisis situations and the points of access and intervention are multifarious especially if the varying support services within an institution are long-standing, communicate and refer effectively with each other and externally. For the purposes of this research we focused on student access to the following:

- Welfare advisors
- Counsellors
- Chaplains
- Faith advisors
- Tutors

The questions asked in this section were designed to examine whether students know where to find support within their institutions regardless of the problems they had or if this posed a difficulty. We also wanted to understand where respondents commonly accessed support whether formally or informally and what the nature of this access was. Further to this we were also seeking to understand the perceptions of student support on campus specifically if students did seek support would they seek it on campus or externally? We considered that – perhaps due to the perception that advisory and wellbeing services were for issues of crisis or desperation – in the first instance the students would seek support from informal networks such friends, families and perhaps tutors. What was also considered was that students might eschew these informal networks to access other types of external support, such as mental health services provided by the NHS.

Key findings

- The majority of respondents reported that they knew where to access support (79 per cent). Although 21 per cent of respondents did not know. (Figure 4)

- While most respondents knew where to access support, the majority would access it either through friends (92 per cent) or family (88 per cent). (Figure 6)

- A tenth would not tell anyone if they were suffering from problems of mental distress or vulnerability. (Figure 5)

- Half of respondents said they would seek support through their tutors, while a sizeable minority would use advice centres at their institutions or students' unions. (Figure 7)

- However the majority of respondents indicated that they did not access professional support (61 per cent), only 8 per cent used the advice centre in their institution, and only 6 per cent of respondent used the advice centre in their students' union. (Figure 7)
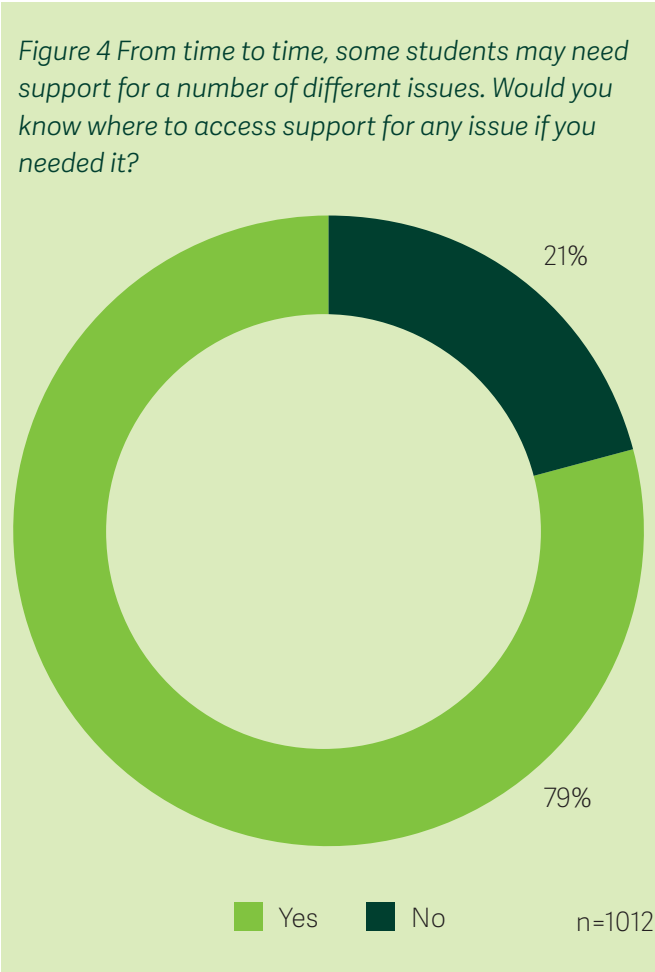
Figure 4 From time to time, some students may need support for a number of different issues. Would you know where to access support for any issue if you needed it?

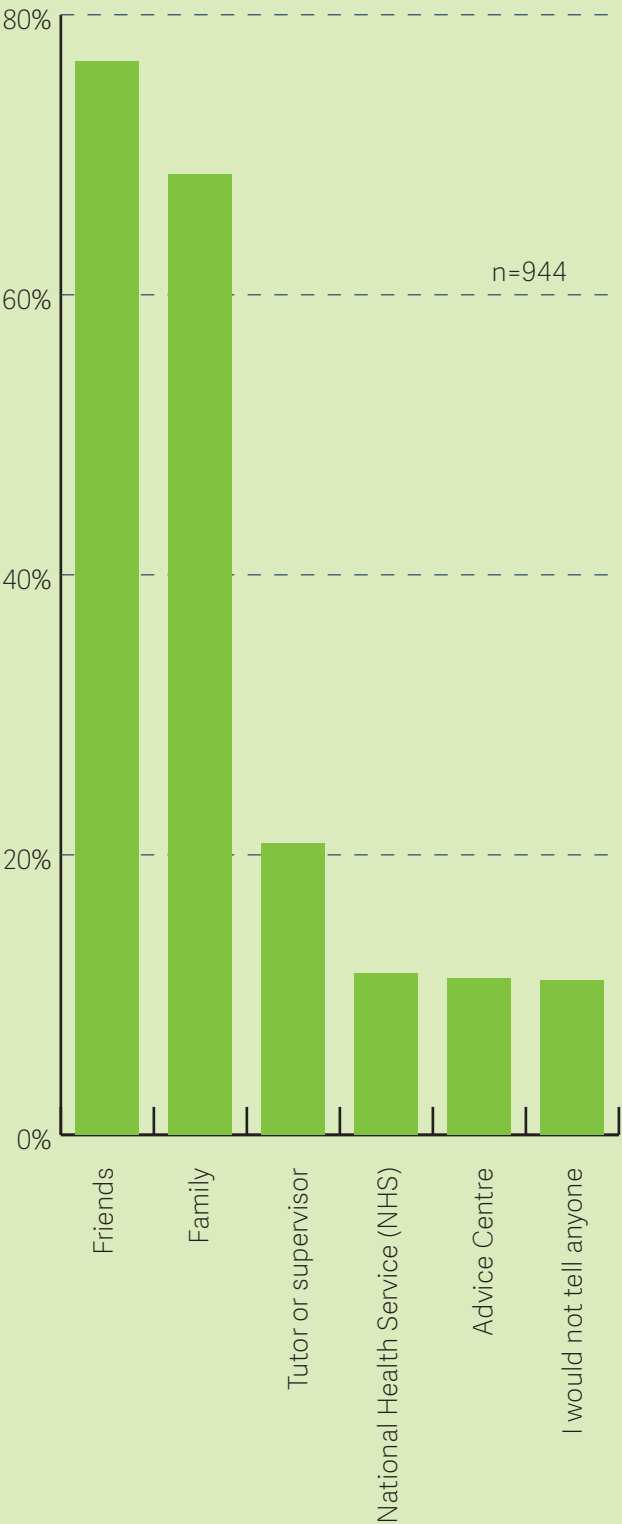*Figure 5 Who would you turn to if you were experiencing these feelings?*

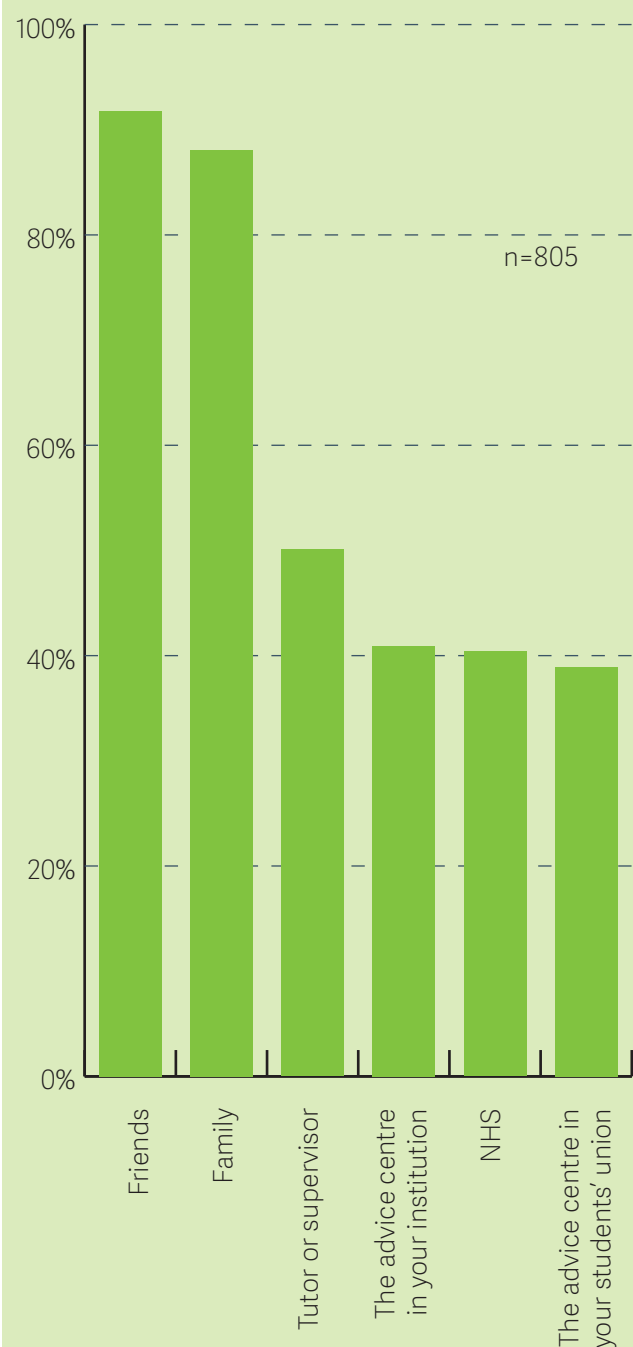*Figure 6 Who, if anyone, did you seek professional support from?*

n=805

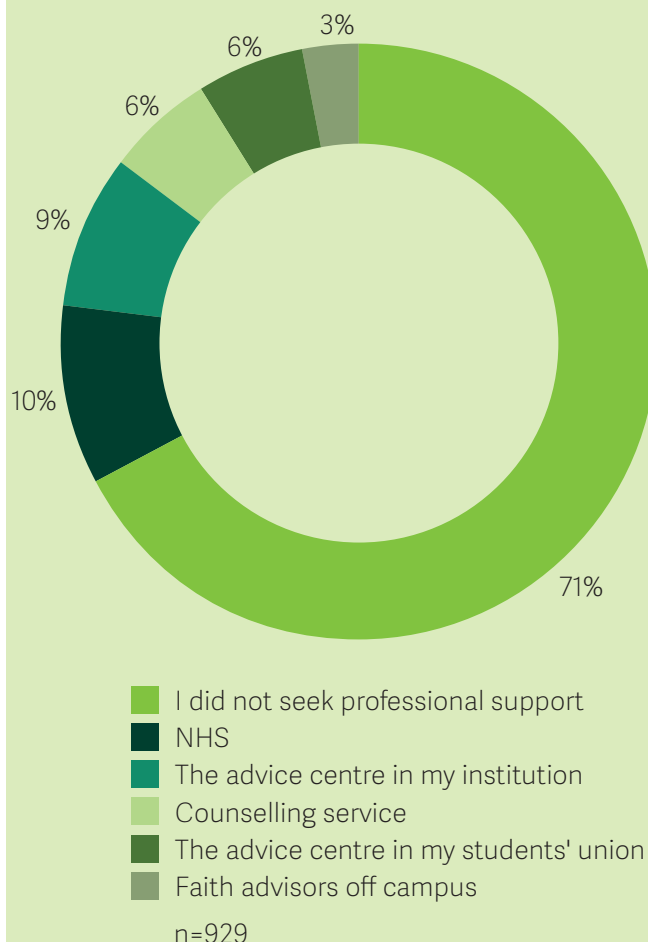*Figure 7 Who, if anyone, did you seek professional support from?*

- I did not seek professional support
- NHS
- The advice centre in my institution
- Counselling service
- The advice centre in my students' union
- Faith advisors off campus

n=929

Knowledge of support services and disclosure

The majority of respondents reported that they knew what support services they could access. However over a fifth of respondents reported that they did not know where to access these services. This suggests two possibilities: firstly that these services are not properly signposted. Secondly, there is an assumption that these students are having a myriad of problems and may know of support services but do not know which one they can access or if they need the support of several different services. While the majority of respondents knew where to access support services there wasn't much evidence that they accessed these services for the issues of mental distress and isolation that they had previously indicated in the previous section.

Overwhelmingly, respondents reported that they did not seek professional support. In light of the symptoms of mental distress they reported in the previous section this is a worrying trend. However, the extensive use of peer support suggests that students do not want to seek professional support when they initially feel they have a problem of mental distress or isolation. Worryingly, even as an addition to peer support, professional services aren't used by the majority of respondents who reported to having suffered serious mental health conditions. Interestingly just under half of respondents would look to their tutors rather than professional support services. In the context of the ways student support is presented and promoted to potential students this does make sense, in that personal tutors are meant to act as the first point of contact for any student's problem. However, this does place a burden on tutors whose primary function is academic – not pastoral or emotional – and it does place a further responsibility on the tutors to signpost services adequately. This is a function they may not feel comfortable fulfilling. The consequence here is that consistent non-disclosure (to professionals) means not only less access to support services, but a tendency amongst students not to talk openly about their experiences. This puts them in a vulnerable position if these feelings persist and they do not seek an avenue for help.

Accessing support services and barriers to access

Of the students who did access services there was no discernable difference regarding what they used. A similar number of respondents used advice centres in their institutions or students' unions, and in terms of external support most used NHS services. A minority used counselling services but not to a significant level. From the responses in this section the clearest indication is that students are aware of the services they can access, but are held back from accessing them, preferring rather to access informal networks of support. In practice this means that students need to better understand what do if other students disclose feelings of mental distress or isolation to them.

Consequently, it means that the type of outreach work student services should facilitate is a wider gradation of the principles of peer support, and group support in an informal sense to the student body.

External support and tutor support

It was clear from the results that respondents also saw tutors, as well as external support, as more viable options than the support mechanisms at their institutions. According to our results, students initially turn to friends and family in times of distress, and then to external professional support or their tutors. This is indicative of a number of things: firstly that knowledge or purpose of support mechanisms may be in question; secondly that tutor support is probably more viable because of this, in that tutors can signpost services to students.

The fact that students do not readily go to university-based professional support services doesn't mean they are ineffective, but rather that students consider a number of other factors before accessing university-based support. Furthermore, if the support mechanisms are based within the university environment and this environment and culture is the probable reason behind their mental distress it is not surprising they do not access this support. While there is no conclusive reason that students would not access external and tutor support frequently, it does stand to reason and previous evidence that the types of mental distress they were feeling were transitory and alleviated when the academic year ended.

For those with longer standing and more serious feelings of mental distress, disclosure was a key issue. The anonymity of talking to friends and family, rather than to professional or public support services, would contribute to lack of access, despite robust policies around confidentiality. Finally, the nature of campus support (regardless of how effective services are) means that it is focused on the environment and the retention and enrichment of the student while they study. If a student's emotional distress is unrelated to their study, and it was evident that personal and family problems were contributing factors, and then advice and support would be sought externally because these issues are related to other avenues of identity.

How do students support fellow students at risk of isolation and vulnerability?

Background

Considering the effects and symptoms of social isolation, it is reasonable to assume that respondents would share their experiences of mental distress and isolation to their peers. Since self-diagnosis and information regarding mental health is often unavailable or unknown to an individual unless they have been a long-term sufferer of a mental health condition, it can be assumed that students may not initially understand experiences that could culminate in isolation, and therefore would talk to friends and family before mental health professionals.

Furthermore, the university experience is often relatively brief and intense and one in which individuals socialise in a way that may not be conducive to long-term social relationships. While the purpose is academic, the experience of university is social and developmental both intellectually and emotionally. The novelty of such an experience means that students, especially those who are responsible for their own wellbeing for the first time, can find the experience overwhelming. Most students enter their university experience with a level of isolation, as they are living apart from the social network they are accustomed to. This can facilitate further feelings of vulnerability.

If an individual student does not integrate with peers quickly this can develop into a long-standing issue affecting their mental and physical wellbeing, as well as their ability to perform academically. If we consider the times an institution should intervene with a potentially vulnerable, or at least support the student there are number of clear reasons such as an isolated student is an issue for retention for the pastoral commitment of the institution and a reputational issue. This is why institutions provide so much resource to the initial social side of university life; this however does not necessarily mean these activities are inclusive for the

widening demographic of students entering into UK institutions. This is especially true for international students, who will invariably have different cultural and social expectations than those of their peers. It may be also be true of students of faith and those of minority backgrounds. Given the nature of higher education, the socio-cultural expectations of class also play a significant role.

Therefore, university can be a disquieting experience; alongside periods of consistent socialisation there is a necessity of solitude for purposes of study, which facilitate a heightened intensity of experience. Disclosure and peer support take a further level of importance in the context of university, as there is a pressure to integrate and socialise quickly, and a stigma around how the campus is experienced. This can make certain groups of students vulnerable if they feel there are overarching cultural norms or groups at their university.

In this section we asked questions about whether students had experience of supporting other students under mental distress and, further to this, we asked questions to gather how students supported their peers.

Key findings

- In the context of supporting others with problems of isolation or vulnerability, 74 per cent of respondents reported that fellow students had talked to them about stress, with a further 54 per cent reporting lack of energy or motivation. (Figure 8)

- In terms of responses to those who disclosed feelings of mental distress, less than a fifth of respondents recommended that their fellow student seek professional support off-campus. The majority (86 per cent) listened to and supported them themselves. (Figure 9)

Figure 8 Whether related to study or not, have any of your fellow students talked to you about feeling any of the following?
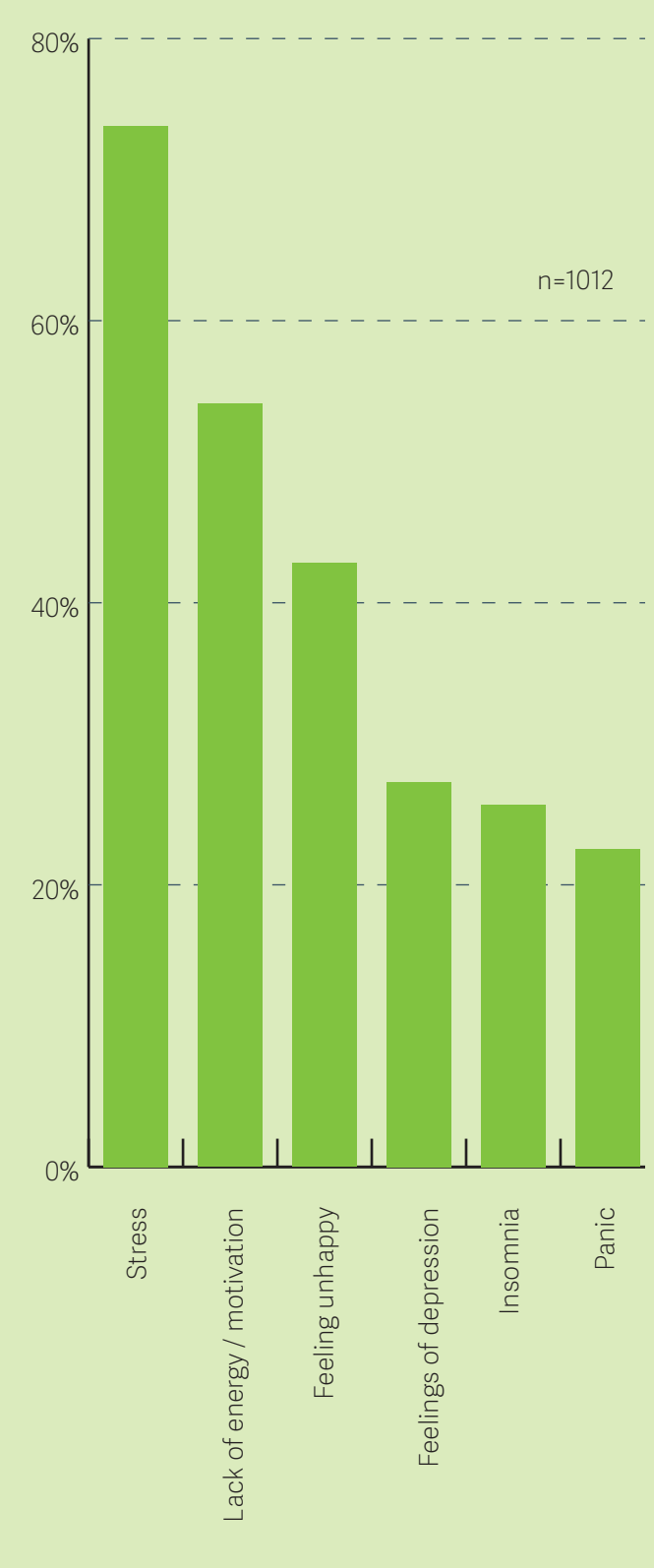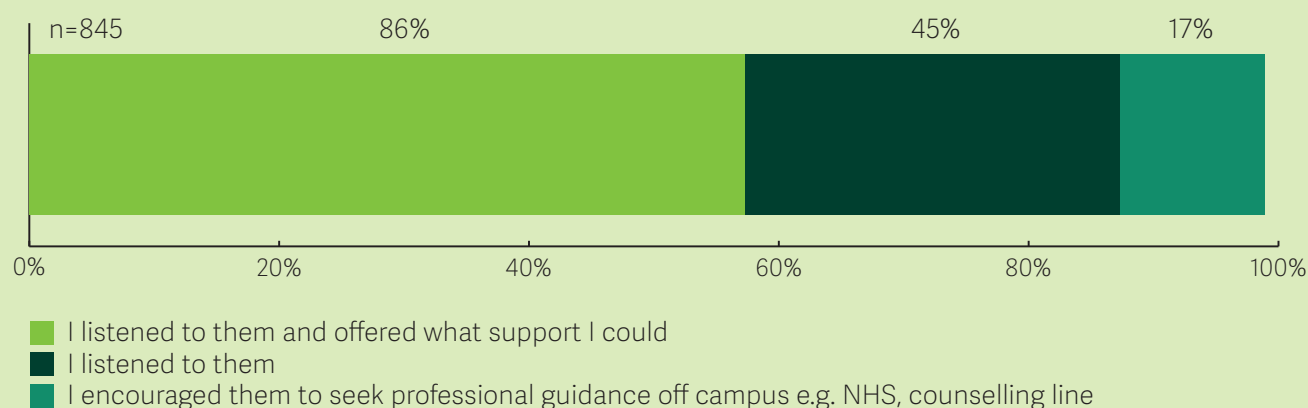
n=1012

Figure 9 How did you respond to this?

n=845	86%	45%	17%

- I listened to them and offered what support I could
- I listened to them
- I encouraged them to seek professional guidance off campus e.g. NHS, counselling line

Disclosure to peers and peer support

There was a slight variance in the types of issues students reported they had experienced themselves, compared to those that had been disclosed to them. While stress and lack of motivation were still the areas most students disclosed to each other or experienced more, students were willing to talk about more serious issues.

As well as a minority expressing feelings of depression, respondents also indicated issues of panic and insomnia had been disclosed, with around one in five respondents having been disclosed to regarding panic, and just over a quarter of respondents suffering from insomnia. The fact that these issues were disclosed to peers rather than to professional support suggests that students do not see them as indicative of any wider problem of mental distress or isolation. Or perhaps these issues are temporary and quite possibly a result of stress or lack of motivation, which respondents indicated they were experiencing to high degree.

However, since there was a variance in disclosure and direct experience of mental distress or isolation, the responses here do indicate that many students will disclose to their peers a different set of symptoms than they would in a formal sense, such as within a survey. This gives more onus to the fact that a number of social and emotional anxieties are expressed in different situations. In terms of the support offered, respondents spent time listening to their peers and offering their own personal support, but only small portion (17 per cent) recommended their peers seek

professional support. In light of the seriousness of some of the experiences disclosed, this could be seen as problem. However, the fact that students were disclosing amongst themselves suggests that informal peer support groups are an effective means of self-care, albeit temporarily. The caveat is that when a number of issues and events create a sense of isolation and vulnerability, peer/informal and professional support are both needed to alleviate isolation. Peer support can be highly effective, but in the context of understanding the particular mental health issue disclosed, and specifically if the issue persists alongside professional support.

Isolation and vulnerability amongst students of faith and belief

Background

The majority of respondents in this survey described themselves as students of faith or belief. In terms of the demographic spread, Christian and Muslim students were widely represented. Christian respondents made up just over 43 per cent of the sample. In the 2011 census 59 per cent of the UK described themselves as Christian, therefore our sample broadly correlates with national statistics. Muslim respondents made up just over a quarter of the sample, at 26 per cent, and 2.4 per cent of the population describe themselves as Muslim in the latest census figures. [x] Other faiths were represented: 6 per cent Jewish, 5 per cent Buddhist, and 4 per cent Agnostic.

This section will focus explicitly on feelings of isolation and vulnerability of students of faith, in order to discover if there are any significant differences between isolation and vulnerability amongst students in general and students of faith. We are looking at students of faith in particular, because there are a number of ways in which faith can facilitate or appear to facilitate a divergence between the students of faith and fellow students.

This can appear in practical issues, such as: the ability to openly worship on campus, the availability of prayer space, and availability of adequate pastoral support. Divergence may also occur for more political reasons – such as the tension between freedom of speech and freedom from harm couched in terms of religious and secular debate – and assumptions about the convergence of political and religious radicalism on campus. The product of this can be a student of faith feeling ostracised from their peers, fearing reprisal, or having feelings of structural isolation from the institution when supporting faith-based activities.

While students of faith – like any other group – are in a secular space of debate, it is more than likely that regardless of their faith they may feel a sense of vulnerability as a group, due to the nature of current political debates around faith and its significance in public life. However, as individuals this should impact them less so, specifically because group identity and values are in theory more concrete. This is not to say that an interface of problems may lead to individuals of faith experiencing feelings of isolation and vulnerability, especially if they feel their faith conflicts with other issues such as political views, or gender or sexual identity.

The experience of Muslim students

There were 262 respondents (around 26 per cent of the sample) who described their faith or belief as Muslim. The major ethnic groups were Pakistani (37 per cent), Bangladeshi (18 per cent) and Indian (16 per cent). Around 50 per cent of these respondents described themselves as women, while 46 per cent described themselves as men.

Key findings

Indicators of isolation and vulnerability

- The main feelings of mental distress amongst Muslim students were: stress, (75 per cent), lack of energy/motivation (66 per cent), and feeling unhappy (52 per cent). In addition to the experiences presented here, 29 per cent of students experienced sudden changes in mood and feelings of hopelessness, and a further 28 per cent had experienced feelings of panic.

- In terms of the frequency of these feelings, around a fifth of respondents (20 per cent) had these feelings often. While 47 per cent had these feelings all the time.

- The main reasons respondents reported for feeling mental distress were: academic issues (79 per cent), personal or family issues (44 per cent), career aspirations (36 per cent) and financial difficulties (31 per cent).

- A small proportion of students also reported homesickness (15 per cent) and issues of faith and belief (13 per cent).

Where Muslim students seek support

- Most Muslim respondents (71 per cent) said they knew where to find support. However, almost third of respondents did not know where to seek support, significantly higher than the average of the entire survey (21 per cent).

- The overwhelming majority of Muslim respondents (78 per cent) said they did not seek professional support for their problems of mental distress. Of those that did, 8 per cent used a university advice centre, and 7 per cent used a students' union advice centre.

- More than one in ten of Muslim respondents would not tell anyone if they were experiencing mental distress, though two thirds would disclose to their friends.

The majority of Muslim students (88 per cent) would seek support from friends, 83 per cent would seek support from family, a further 44 per cent would seek support from a tutor, and 22 per cent would turn to a religious (or prayer) group.

Supporting fellow students

- Just over 65 per cent of Muslim students had friends who had experienced stress, 45 per cent had lacked energy or motivation and 34 per cent had felt unhappy.

- Just under a fifth of respondents reported, 'I do not know of anybody who has experienced these feelings.'

- In terms of how they supported fellow students, respondents reported listening (52 per cent) and offering personal support (79 per cent). However, only 6 per cent of students reported recommending professional support.

The experience of Christian students

Introduction

There were 435 respondents, 43 per cent of the entire sample, who described themselves as Christian (including Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations). In terms of ethnic groups 80 per cent described themselves as English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish. While 7 per cent were from other white backgrounds and 3 per cent reported as Irish.

Key findings

Indicators of isolation and vulnerability

- The most common feelings of mental distress amongst Christian students were stress (90 per cent), lack of energy or motivation (80 per cent) and feeling unhappy (69 per cent). Sizeable minorities of these students also experienced feelings of depression (45 per cent) and feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness (40 per cent).

- Only 16 per cent of Christians often have feelings of mental distress, while 50 per cent have these feelings sometimes.

- The main reasons respondents reported for feeling mental distress were academic issues (88 per cent), personal or family issues (54 per cent), career aspirations (41 per cent) and financial difficulties (33 per cent).

- A quarter of Christian students also reported homesickness (26 per cent), while 10 per cent reported issues of faith and belief.

Where Christian students seek support

- The majority of Christian respondents (84 per cent) said they knew where to seek support, 16 per cent reported that they did not.

- Most Christian students would seek support from friends (93 per cent), family (90 per cent), a tutor (56 per cent), a counselling service (25 per cent) or a religious/prayer group (21 per cent).

- Most Christians would tell their friends (83 per cent), family (74 per cent), tutors (25 per cent), or a religious group (13 per cent). If they had problems of mental distress only 8 per cent reported that they would not tell anyone.

- Just over two-thirds of Christians would not seek professional support for problems of mental distress (69 per cent). Of those who do seek support, 14 per cent used the NHS and related services, 9 per cent used the advice centre at their institution, and 8 per cent used the counselling service at their institution.

Just over two-thirds of Christians would not seek professional support for problems of mental distress (69 per cent). Of those who do seek support, 14 per cent used the NHS and related services, 9 per cent used the advice centre at their institution, and 8 per cent used the counselling service at their institution.

Supporting fellow students

- Most Christian respondents reported that friends had disclosed experiences of stress (79 per cent), lack of energy (61 per cent), and feeling unhappy 69 per cent

- A sizeable minority also reported feelings of depression (35 per cent), insomnia (29 per cent) and panic (28 per cent).

- While almost a quarter of Christian students (23 per cent) would encourage their fellow students to seek professional support, most respondents listened to (42 per cent) and offered personal support to their fellow students (89 per cent).

The significance of the findings for students of faith and belief

Muslim students

Muslim respondents had similar experiences to the sample as a whole. For the majority of responses, Muslim students were experiencing the same issues of mental distress and stress, with reasons centred on academic pressure and with a similar frequency. Where Muslim students diverge from the experiences of other students are the ways in which they access – or rather do not access – student support. In the overall results 21 per cent of students reported they did not know where to seek support. Amongst Muslim students this stands at 29 per cent, which is almost a third of Muslim students surveyed. Furthermore, with the majority of Muslim students, 78 per cent did not seek support for their issues of mental distress, compared with 67 per cent overall.

Barriers to peer and professional support for Muslim students

Much of the data suggests overall that peer support is more difficult amongst Muslim students. There is both a higher proportion of mental distress due to issues of faith and belief; with over 10 per cent of Muslim students reporting that this was the reason for their mental distress. There is also less of a tendency to disclose feelings of mental distress, with 15 per cent of Muslim respondents not disclosing their experiences to anyone. Furthermore, a fifth of Muslim respondents reported that no-one had disclosed feelings of mental distress to them; compared to overall results in which 15 per cent of respondents had not had anyone disclose to them. Muslim respondents were also more likely to turn to a faith or prayer group at times of mental distress and less likely to go to a personal tutor (44 per cent), than respondents overall (50 per cent). The responses from Muslim students suggest there is ambivalence, both about disclosure of feelings of mental distress and vulnerability, but also a reluctance to seek help from the institution or friends. This may because services aren't clearly signposted to Muslim students, there may also be cultural aspect, due to the fact the Muslim students were also of South Asian descent. Since we did not collect whether or not these

students were international students it has been difficult to gather whether this is indicative of a wider cultural trend. What is obvious, however, is that Muslim students do not seek support at the same level as the rest of their peers.

Christian students

A higher proportion of Christian students reported issues of stress and lack of motivation, as well as other issues of mental distress, than students generally. In terms of how frequently they have these feelings, a lower percentage of Christian respondents had these feelings often, while 50 per cent of respondents reported feeling mental distress sometimes, which is broadly similar to overall results. While the reasons behind issues of mental distress were similar to overall results, Christians feel more homesick than average and more so than their Muslim counterparts, and a similar percentage reported issues of faith as a reason for mental distress.

Peer and professional support amongst Christian students

A higher percentage of Christian students knew where to find support (84 per cent) than Muslim students; this was marginally higher than the overall responses. Informal support was extremely high amongst Christian students, with nine out of ten using friends or family for this reason. Christian students appear also make more use of personal tutors than the overall average and Muslim students. A quarter of students also used counselling services or religious support groups. Christians reported a broader range of mental distress issues disclosed to them, and are more likely to encourage others to seek professional support. The responses from Christian students suggest that there are stronger links between them and institutions, as they know where to access support even if they are not doing so. There are also clearer lines of pastoral support with a range of issues discussed. However, there was a broader range of mental distress issues faced by Christian students. This is down to the sample size, but also suggestive that Christian students feel more comfortable disclosing than students generally, or their Muslim counterparts. Presumably, the reason for this is down to the cultural position of Christianity, in that

it has long-established cultural norms which integrate alongside the academic norms of the campus. This may be down to the cultural position of the Christian faith in Britain and the nature of an established belief system, which operates alongside political and social norms. Also, the numbers of Christians on campus – while not a majority – are a sizable minority compared to other denominations. Christian students appear to have a stronger group identity and established social groups within the university environment. This may allay the obvious feelings of mental distress and isolation which students of other less culturally established faith groups are more likely to experience.

Other faith groups

While Christian and Muslim students made up 69 per cent of the sample, there were minorities of responses from other faith groups within the sample. As the numbers of these responses are individually too low to be anything more than indicative, we banded the remaining faith groups together with 211 responses from students of other faiths. This includes those who reported as Hindu (7 per cent), Buddhist (6 per cent), Sikh (3 per cent) and Jewish (2 per cent).

Indicators of isolation and vulnerability

- Broadly, students of other faiths experienced the same issues of mental distress as the overall sample. For example: stress (90 per cent), lack of motivation (74 per cent), while just over half reported having feelings of insomnia, depression, anger and hopelessness.

- A fifth of students of other faiths had feelings of mental distress often, and just below half reported to having these feelings periodically.

- Academic issues and family and personal problems were the most pertinent reasons for these feelings. Less than 10 per cent of this group felt that their mental distress was down to issues of faith and belief.

Where students of other faiths seek support

- In the sample group comprising of students of other faiths, 78 per cent said they knew where to find support if they needed it. This was broadly similar to the overall findings.

- As with the overall results, students of other faiths overwhelmingly went to friends (90 per cent) or family (90 per cent) for support with mental distress in the first instance. However, students who reported within these faiths were also more likely to use advice centres (45 per cent).

- The majority of respondents in this group did seek professional support for their issues of mental distress (74 per cent). Of those that did, the advice centre was the most common place to turn to, comprising of 10 per cent of respondents.

Supporting fellow students

- The most common feelings disclosed by fellow students were stress (76 per cent), lack of motivation (54 per cent), feeling unhappy (21 per cent), feelings of depression (27 per cent) and insomnia (25 per cent).

- Students of other faiths were more likely to recommend external support (16 per cent) or advice centres (10 per cent). Although most offered personal support for friends who had disclosed to them (87 per cent).

Barriers to faith and belief students accessing support services

To a greater or lesser extent, a significant proportion of students of faith and belief do not feel able to access support services. This does not necessarily mean they are ostracized; rather there is a more robust cultural and group dynamic at play. While the significance of faith was not an impediment to accessing support, it did mean that students of faith and belief experienced their campus in a different way to their non-faith peers. Tellingly, negative experiences due to faith were common amongst a minority of respondents. Applying this to the wider environment of the campus, this can act as a significant barrier to accessing support, especially if the campus feels like hostile environment.

It is important to emphasise how the cultural environment affects students of faith. From the staff survey, a chaplain commented that students of faith and belief initially find it hard to negotiate the secular space of the campus. This cultural adaptation, alongside the difficulty of adapting to the academic and social environment of higher education, can act as barrier. Many students of faith will feel that their faith is an issue of personal identity, while the institution sees their faith in policy and procedural terms as a lifestyle choice. The secular nature of most universities also prefigures seeing students of faith as drawn from particular large institutions of organised faith, however, personal experience of faith does necessarily mean it is doctrinal. Thus support services can be perceived to be generalised to dominant faith groups on campus, and, while pastoral care is available, this can be generally be for all students and may not tally with an individual's belief system.

The barriers to students of faith and belief accessing support are cultural. While most support services may have an adequate knowledge to support students of faith, the appearance on most campuses is that there is no particular faith-based support. For campuses which have a concentration of minority groups or international students of a variety of different faiths, beliefs and cultures this poses a significant problem, because these students may perceive their peer groups and cultural norms a far more effective means of lessening their social isolation. Furthermore, the appearance of 'secular' support services may make them feel more vulnerable about what is a distinct element of identity, rather than a cultural and lifestyle choice. This is not to say that an increase in faith-based support is the only answer, but rather increased signposting to these services alongside awareness of the norms of differing faith and belief groups could contribute to a safer social environment for students of faith and belief.

The social context of isolation and vulnerability

Background

Social isolation occurs – not because of an individual's propensity to introspection or lack of social interaction – but rather because those social interactions become dampened by events or perceptions. This leads them to a different way of seeing the social context they are in. Thus we have focused on the isolation of individual students, however, there are events which mean certain groups will have their group identity questioned and so feel isolated as a group.

Universities are institutions that have a specified role in promoting debate; they also have a role in protecting their students from incidences of hate speech and victimisation. As centres of debate universities also operate as political spaces, spaces in which discourse is promulgated and encouraged. However, this can mean that freedom of speech and freedom from harm are constantly in conflict, as is the public role of the institution in how it protects its students.

Therefore, the campus can transform from a relatively safe space of reasoned debate to a hostile environment for certain groups. In this context, institutions have more responsibility to ensure that students do not feel isolated, especially if there are cultural groups in conflict. If students do not feel safe on campus they are unable to engage properly in an academic or social sense and can avoid the physical and social space of the campus altogether. Therefore not accessing support services that could be helpful in working through issues of isolation.

Thus, the situation perpetuates further isolation and creates a space of vulnerability for students who already feel isolated from their peers, or the general cultural consensus on campus. These particular experiences can also lead to political alienation and increasingly leftfield social and political views. Respondents were asked how they were affected by certain types of ongoing issues and events.

Figure 10 How do you feel you've been affected by the following?

Legend: Negatively affected / Slightly negatively affected

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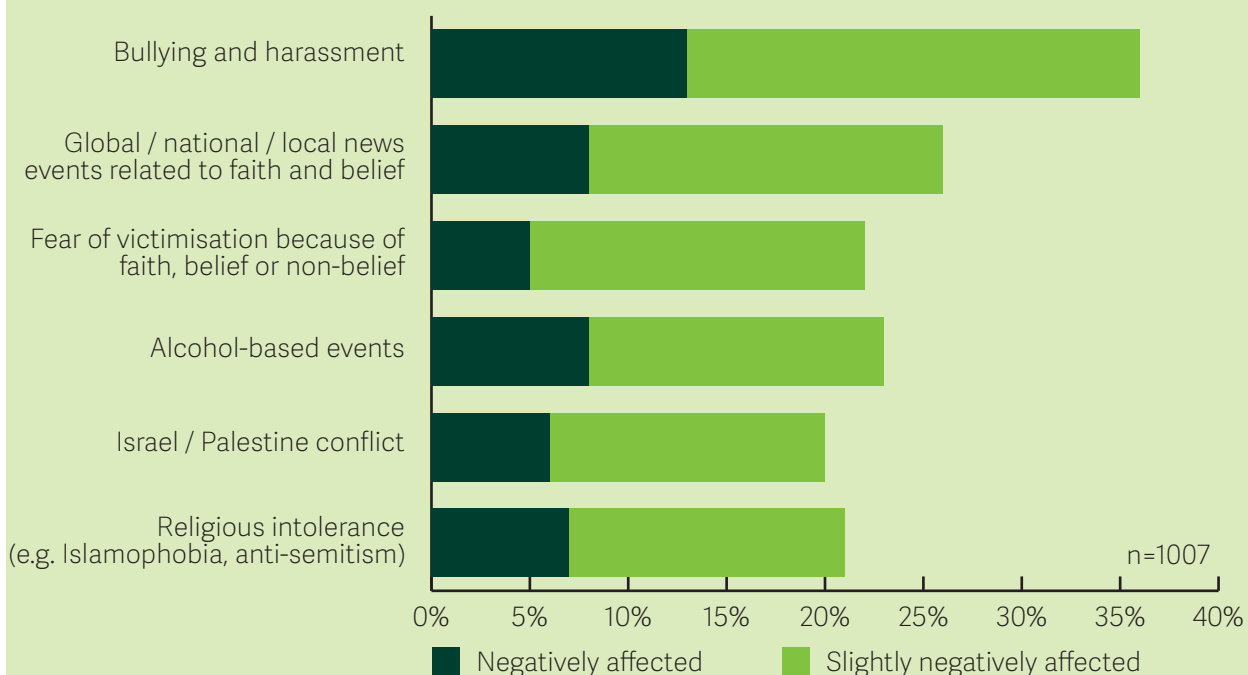
Key findings

- Respondents indicated that bullying and harassment was the most prevalent issue affecting respondents, with 13 per cent negatively affected or slightly negatively affected (23 per cent) by the issue (Figure 10).

- A minority of respondents also indicated that they were being negatively affected or slightly negatively affected by fear of victimisation because of faith, belief or non-belief (Figure 10).

A safe space for students of faith?

- A quarter of Muslim students reported that they had been slightly negatively affected by religious intolerance, 13 per cent had been negatively affected.

- A quarter of Muslim students had also been slightly negatively affected by fear of victimisation due to faith.

- Around a fifth of Christian respondents reported to being either slightly negatively affected or negatively affected by religious intolerance on campus.

- Fewer than 10 per cent of Christian students also reported being slightly negatively affected by fear of victimisation due to faith or belief.

Amongst particular faith groups, the proportion of students having negative experiences on campus due to their faith was significantly higher than the overall sample. This suggests there are tangible fears and experiences of religious intolerance or at the very least a perception of alienation due to faith, which contributes to an isolating environment for students of faith. A safe space to socialise and study is imperative to avoid the isolation of students. From the evidence presented here, many students are not experiencing their campus as a safe space. The fact that over quarter of respondents felt they had been harassed or bullied is indicative that a campus can be an arena of high tension and conflict. Remembering that the sample is comprised mainly of students of faith, it is also interesting that 17 per cent of students fear victimisation due to religion, and that another 15 per cent had negative experiences of alcohol-based events. More than one in ten students fear a climate of religious intolerance.

Consequently, the inclusivity of the university environment has to be questioned, especially if it is not alleviating certain minorities from the fears of victimisation or intolerance. The further consequences of this environment link back to theories of social isolation, which look at the wider community and social structures. While the campus is not an alienating environment for most students, the anxieties expressed from respondents here suggest it is for some students of faith and belief. If individuals feel they may be isolated due to their faith or belief, this may mean that they do not access pastoral and mental health support, which could alleviate their feelings of isolation. It also means the likelihood of finding a supportive peer group or activity is less likely, since for students the campus represents the main arena of social interaction.

Isolation and vulnerability from a staff perspective

Background

Welfare, pastoral and mental health support services play a pivotal role within higher education institutions, providing formal and informal emotional and advisory support, alongside the proportioned support that tutors can offer. Nominally welfare roles are distinct, in that staff such as counsellors will deal directly with mental health issues of students, advisors their academic and financial needs and pastoral support with spiritual and emotional needs. However, in practice these areas will inevitably cross over. This is a pertinent issue for students of faith, as, regardless of the faith they follow, their decisions and experience at university will be informed by the moral codes of their faith. A particular example of this has been the specialist financial advice some Muslims students will need in accordance with student loans and access to student finance and frameworks around Sharia law. Unlike their non-faith peers, students of faith will see their religion as a fundamental part of their identity. Thus, knowing how to support students of faith is an important sensitivity and skill to have outside of just pastoral support roles. From the results of the student survey it was clear also that students do not always initially access the support structures from their institution, and if they do, they look to their personal or academic tutors first. This means there is a further need for staff to know the nuances of supporting students of faith, and a necessity for faith-based support services on campus.

However, the role of student support specifically for students of faith and belief has been a contested one. While some institutions directly fund chaplains to provide pastoral support for students, most in England are either funded by the Church of England or offer support voluntarily outside of their normal duties to their local communities. Those funded by the Church of England will also have other duties dictated by the Church, which may impede on their duties as a chaplain. Furthermore, it is not always the case that a chaplain will be found that has experience in a multi-faith context. Consequently some students of faith may not feel they are able to access pastoral support from someone not of their faith. This can pose a problem, especially if the campus has a large and varied demographic of students with different cultural heritages and a variety of pastoral issues.

While welfare and wellbeing support can act in lieu of and in conjunction with pastoral support, a lack of pastoral support is a serious issue for an institution. This is because it acts in a liminal way between formal and informal or peer support. Often there is a stigma surrounding accessing formal support services such as counsellors, but a chaplain can offer support that is far less clinical and can intervene in social and emotional issues before they manifest themselves in more erratic behaviour. Institutions have an investment in retention and making sure that students thrive in order to prove their value to higher education funders, thus pastoral services could be said to be vital. However, this type of support relies heavily on informal networks and students seeking out services rather than being referred, meaning it is often harder to gauge the types of support a student has previously accessed unless they disclose this, and assess if a package of care is needed for the student. It also relies on robust reporting mechanisms and communication between staff when they feel they cannot deal with an issue that may need a faith professional.

Results of the staff survey

There were 84 complete responses to the survey. The majority of respondents worked in the following areas: Advice (57 per cent), mental health support/counsellor (23 per cent) and chaplaincy (25 per cent).

Access

- Students access services in varied ways, respondents indicated that drop-ins, referrals and formal appointments were the most commonly used, with telephone, email and social media.

Collaboration

- The distinction between respondents who reported their institution had a referral process with those who did not was roughly equal. With 45 per cent of respondents reporting that they had a referral process, and 48 per cent reporting that they had no formal referral process.

- Text-based responses indicated that for many respondents, while there was a referral process, many staff did not use it. For example: "We have a referral procedure in place for some but not all other services, but discretion will always play a part, particularly in cases where referral is urgent."

- Just under half of respondents used a formal record keeping system such as AdvicePro (43 per cent), while just under a quarter (23 per cent) used their own system.

- Only a fifth of respondents consider their support structures highly effective at communicating with each other. Though almost half (47 per cent) think their support structures are reasonably effective at communicating with each other.

- There are three main points at which referral occurs: firstly when there is another more appropriate agency with specialist knowledge that can support the student more adequately (80 per cent), when counselling was required (75 per cent), and concern about the safety of the individual or fellow students (73 per cent).

Identifying isolated students

- In terms of characteristics which respondents thought signified isolation and vulnerability, the following were the most associated: anxiety (91 per cent), feelings of hopelessness (91 per cent), feeling unhappy and depressed (81 per cent) and thoughts of self-harm (81 per cent).

- Behaviours seen as the most indicative of isolated and vulnerable students included: increased absence (90 per cent) and withdrawal from social activities (98 per cent).

- Most staff use past experience (44 per cent) and specialist knowledge, rather than seeing present trends as a means to identify isolated or vulnerable students.

Supporting students of faith and belief

- Despite a quarter of the sample being made up of chaplains, 40 per cent of respondents reported to hardly ever giving advice on faith and belief issues.

- Of the faith and belief issues disclosed to staff the most prevalent were the following: conflict between faith and sexuality (49 per cent), prejudice or harassment due to faith (46 per cent) and crisis of faith (39 per cent).

- A large amount of respondents believed they were either adequately confident or very confident in dealing with issues of faith and belief (69 per cent).

- There are surges of seeking support about the following themes on campus: alcohol based events (56 per cent) and prayer space (38 per cent).

Anecdotal evidence from interviews

The two interviews we conducted were with chaplains, from different parts of the UK, who had similar experiences with students of faith and their support of students who were isolated and vulnerable. Both chaplains had experienced a significant contraction in the capacity of their work, in that they were the sole support for faith students in large multi-faith institutions. Moreover, both were funded directly by the Church of England rather than directly by the institution, the very concept of pastoral often seen as non-essential. Two things were apparent from the interviewees: staff were dedicated to their roles – often working beyond their individual capacity – and their links to other support staff were rich. However, they were built around informal relationships with other support services rather than a formal record-keeping or communication process. Professional discretion and emotional sensitivity were key in building relationships with students. It has to be further noted that the chaplains felt their role was to signpost and offer emotional support at a point before professional services (i.e. counsellors/advisors) would intervene, and in situations in which the student may have disclosed one issue seemingly unrelated to isolation and vulnerability, but may have lead them to feel vulnerable nonetheless.

Key findings

Access and collaboration

The role of the chaplaincy is one that is not prescriptive and while the interviewees had similar experiences of day-to-day work, their overall function as chaplain was different. For instance the London-based chaplain described their role as an emotional and spiritual support, and also acted in and informal advisory role to the senior management and vice-chancellor of their institution regarding faith matters. While the Church of England funded both roles, the London-based chaplain juggled a pastoral role with that of a parish and community role. While both chaplains worked in a multi-faith setting, they were the only staff members in their role – with no advisory roles for any other representatives from other faiths – as such they took the role of emotional spiritual support for those outside of their faith.

The problems involving access and collaboration with colleagues emanated from the fact that the institutions saw pastoral support as an addition, rather than a vital, part of support. Thus the lack of direct funding from the institution meant a direct lack of capacity, both to refer and support more students. For example:

"I get paid by the Church of England to be here, so the university doesn't pay me to be here which is quite a significant point to make, as the university doesn't see it as being important enough to fund at the moment although they may do in the future. But so far it's been the Church of England that's seen this as an important role and their responsibility." **Chaplain, west of England**

The relationships made with other support staff were often informal and dictated not by procedure but by professional discretion, importantly relationships that have been built by individual brokerage rather than the overall structure of support services. Both chaplains saw themselves primarily lead by the needs of individual students and not by the needs of the institution, but were also quick to point out that though they were dealing with vulnerable adults, the students themselves were responsible for the support process. The capacity for outreach work was minimal but with an obvious presence at key events such fresher's week, the emphasis from a chaplain's perspective was on using evidently strained capacity to think creatively about how students need support and this was echoed in how other support agencies approached capacity problems.

Supporting students of faith and belief

"I'm totally led by the person really, rather than me deciding to stop things, it's up to them. They'll probably start coming less to see me, which is always a good sign. I think that if they are there every day you start to feel slightly concerned for them. You start to think, 'gosh, they really need me,' or, 'they feel they really need me,' and when they stop seeing you, you think, 'good, they are settling in to the community." **Chaplain, west of England**

As aforementioned, capacity was a key problem, particularly with pastoral support. However, in terms of the respective institution's support of students of faith, the opinion was positive in what the students could access in terms of support and provision. However, it was felt that pastoral support was in a liminal position. While not undermined by the institution it was not particularly supported financially or with extra resources. Both chaplains had seen a decline in the availability of pastoral support from three or four chaplains to themselves being the sole chaplain. Specialist knowledge was key, while there was an acknowledgement that other support services would inevitably have to support students of faith and belief, it was felt that the knowledge of the chaplaincy was invaluable and that faith matters, even when they were at an interface of other support areas, should be dealt with by the chaplaincy in the first instance and then by other support services if relevant.

The key issue was neither the level of support services and their relationships, or the level of understanding of faith and belief issues by other support services, but rather the level of institutional leadership recognising the value of pastoral support. The London-based chaplain talked about their role as being, "taken seriously posthumously." Meaning that only after they had notable success in pastoral support were they seen as vital, as if the work of the chaplain was considered a welcome addition to centrally funded support services, but in no means a vital service to be funded by the university. There was some concern over the future of pastoral support, especially in the context of not being funded by the institution.

Identifying isolated students

From the view of the interviewees, isolated and vulnerable students are commonly observable on campus, especially in the student's first year. However, this is not to say these students appeared to have any long-standing characteristics of isolation. Furthermore, chaplains were constrained by the nature of their role and activity, which may have involved more outreach work. In terms of the causes of isolation, the environment of the university played a key part. There was a perception that the transition from school to university and the experience of living alone for the first time could create a situation of alienation. Furthermore, that there was pressure to make relationships quickly. Apart from issues of individual autonomy and formative development it was pointed out that groups on campus can adopt 'tribal' habits, and make the university environment appear that there is dominant culture that students feel impelled to follow and this environment is increasingly difficult to emotionally navigate:

"You go from school; you are cared for by your parents or carers and then teachers, who have some degree of pastoral support within secondary schools, to an environment where you're left to your own devices. It's up to you to turn up to lectures, you live independently possibly for the first time, you're having to learn to manage money for the first time, and you're in massive debt. You suddenly come into this world of 'oh this is me' and it can lead to a quite strong sense of isolation, unless you link in with others and can have a laugh with them about the anxieties and fears you might have, and if you can't do that, that's the trouble. If somebody doesn't have a strong enough sense of self to connect with others then they are going to struggle."
Chaplain, London

Research Findings

In London especially it was felt that not only the campus but also the overall environment was an alienating one, especially for international and mature students who do not fulfil the demographic background of the majority. Some students – either those still living at home or those who have moved on campus – may still feel culturally alienated in their new surroundings. In terms of the faith students the particular issues were practical ones: chaplains saw more activity when certain communities were brought into media attention (such as the Lee Rigby murder), or where it was felt a misunderstanding had arisen around issues like prayer space or external speakers.

It must be emphasised that support was seen as temporary and limited in that it was led by the reaction of the student. For example, if the student did not access the chaplain's support it would be assumed that they were coping far better with university life, or if a student refused to be referred it would only happen if the student was a danger to themselves or others. It was also emphasised that formal support mechanisms were not the initial answer to isolation of students, regardless of faith. The attitude chaplains took were to establish increased social activity and better social networks, with referral to other support services being a last resort. Finally, for chaplains, identifying students who are isolated is about noticing the erratic behaviour of those they observe, or those who drop-in for pastoral support. It was emphasised that, unsurprisingly, the role is limited, and there was some professional frustration about the inability to understand the student population at large and their experiences of social isolation and feelings of vulnerability:

"The ones that I know [isolated students], it would be asking questions about their eating habits, their sleeping habits and if they're not doing well in either of those areas then I know they're not coping very well, so I signpost them to a lot of different things that would enable them to reconnect with people. I think, you know, eating and sleeping are the first signs you see of somebody becoming isolated and not realising that's what's wrong with them. But if you are a member of the Muslim community you do tend eat and sleep better. So those are the two things I would look for when I'm talking to people: listening to them and watching them. Body language is key, watching people's body language and how they relate to others. Something like 'the octagon,' which is like a common room I suppose, you can just pick things up from watching their body language. But you know it's only the people I know or meet, I have no idea about the vast number of students and how you would discern other than going up and talking to them and finding a bit about them." **Chaplain, west of England**

Recommendations and Next Steps

Recommendations and Next Steps

The following are some recommendations to be considered as response to the findings from this report. We have also put together some options for what proactive and positive next steps can be taken by students' union and institutions to begin to address some of the concerns raised in this report and start the process of bettering the experience of students of faith and belief.

1. A joined up approach to services

This report has shown that institutions and students' union need to be more creative in their approaches to pastoral and professional support specifically because the points at which students access 'professional support' is consistently unclear. At a number of key intervention points the research found that students tend to in the first instance go to their peers and or tutors for support when facing difficulties even though the report had shown that the majority knew where to seek formal support services. This practice of turning to tutors or peers has inadvertently acted as a barrier to students accessing support as part of established formal structures. We recommend that:

1.1 Institutions and students' unions should be looking in more detail at the demographic and cultural backgrounds of their students and exploring whether multi-faith pastoral services make a difference, in comparison to the traditional Anglican model of multi-faith space. What this will ensure is that collectively we are developing more bespoke pastoral services models that actually reflect the make-up and needs of the student bodies.

1.2 NUS will create a working group led by students and involving representatives from students' unions, support staff and national student faith and belief organisations in order to better understand the needs of students of faith and belief in this area.

1.3 Students' unions and institutions should carry out an 'impact assessment' on the current ways in which they market their services which will highlighted where improvements can be made

1.4 Many institutions have already established pastoral support groups who meet regularly and are often made up of pastoral support and or faith adviser, student's union advisers and institutional student services staff we would recommend that either these groups should expand their membership to include representation from the student body and representatives of tutors from a staff perspective or develop a sub-group to capture the experience and voice of these to important groups.

2. Building the capacity of tutor support

The report highlighted a significant support relationship between vulnerable and isolated students and tutors. This relationship needs further exploration specifically due to the ambiguity in the degree of pastoral support tutors should and do provide. There needs to be a robust assessment of whether tutors are in a position to signpost services adequately and their level of responsibility in offering pastoral to a student, and determining how knowledgeable tutors are on specific issues of faith and belief. We recommend that:

2.1 As there is no national access or oversight into tutor provision at institution level, Students' Union in partnership with their institutions with relevant support from NUS should consider how best to run an internal audit either through a survey and or qualitative research to better understand the experiences of tutors and to capture anecdotal narrative as to types of issues that tutors find they are providing informal pastoral support for. The purpose of this will allow for the following:

a. That the more formal pastoral support structures gain a better understanding of what students issues actual are

b. To collect further case studies in order to map the landscape of support in this area

c. To understand the levels of confidence staff and how well equipped they feel to deal with faith and belief issues

d. To identify the gaps in training and points at which NUS could provide bespoke training on these issues.

3. Building the capacity of peer support

Students of faith also have significant trouble in disclosure at any level. As the report findings have shown peers are the first point of contact for most students when they feel vulnerable and or isolated. They will take on a pastoral role when supporting friends the question is how best to respond to a practice which is so thoroughly embedded in all institutions. This is a difficult area to respond to and will also differ from institution to institution. Some recommendations include:

3.1 Providing bespoke training to those students who are already in roles of leadership and or are actively engaged with the students' union in order that these students as a starting point can signpost effectively to professional services.

3.2 Develop a clear line of reporting for non-engaged students that involve the formal pastoral support services

3.3 Review policy and procedures to ensure they are account for the nuances of faith and belief practices

4. Future research:

NUS acknowledges that this report is the starting point from which further research needs to be developed. We have identified the following three key areas where we feel we would benefit from additional research.
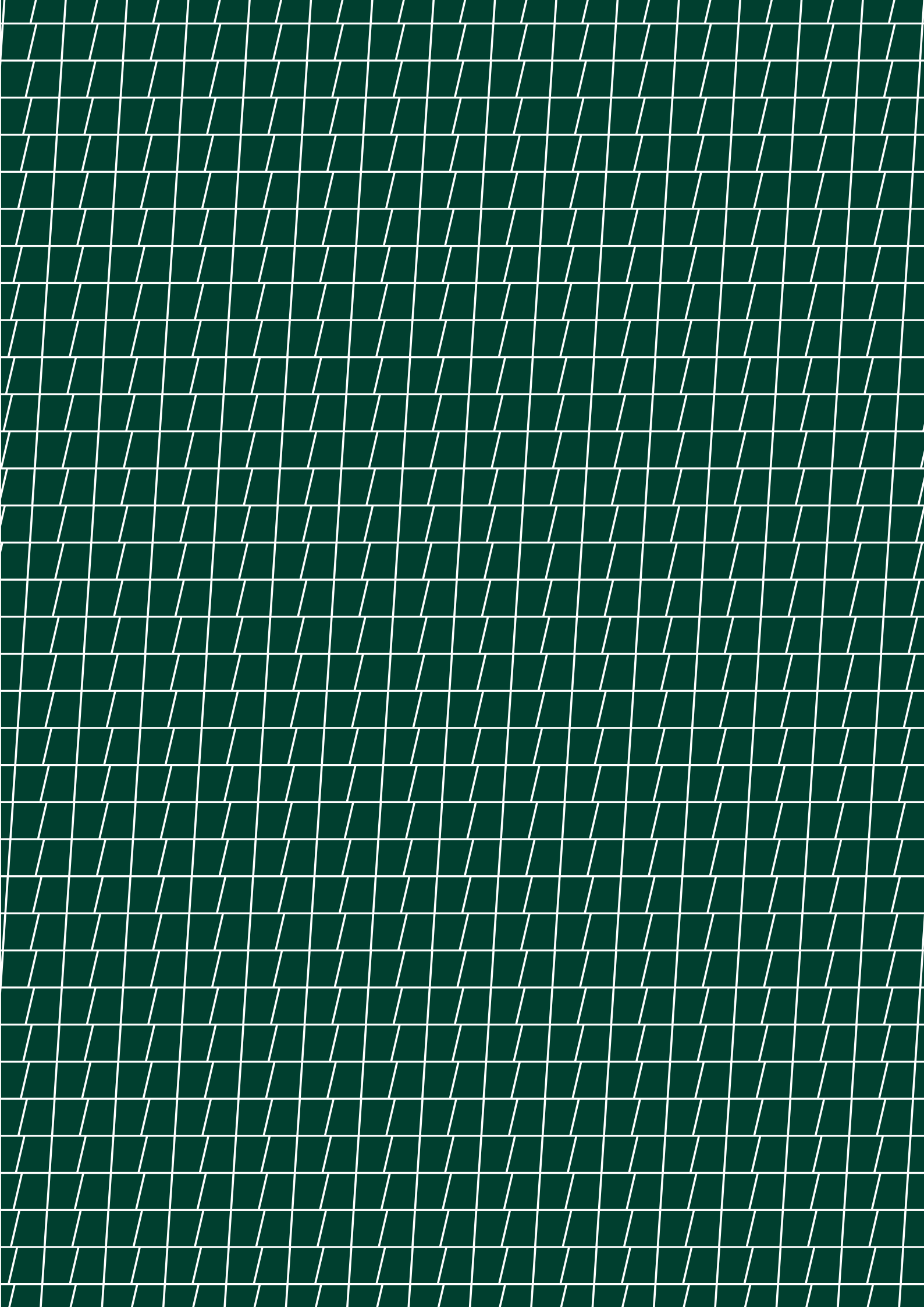
4.1 International students: Since a growing proportion of students at UK institutions are international students there is a necessity for an improvement in cultural awareness on campus. Therefore further research is needed into the experience of international students who define as students of faith and belief, and their experiences of isolation due to xenophobia and religious discrimination. The NUS International Students' Campaign will be developing a research project around xenophobia this year.

4.2 Support services staff: Further qualitative research needs to address the experience of wider support services and where they consider their key access points for isolated students to be, and to look in more detail at how smaller faith groups are supported amongst the student population.

4.3 Further education: Additional research needs to be carried out to address the experience of isolated and vulnerable students of faith in further education and the strategies used in further education to support these students. As further education support structures can be radically different to higher education support structures in would be valuable to explore how the transition from further education to higher education support operates and any gaps in provision

A joint response to this agenda from all key stakeholders including NUS will ensure that we continue to challenge ourselves and constantly critically reflect on our procedures, polices and cultural practices in order to improve the experience of students of faith and belief on our campuses and empower front services to respond to their needs affectively.

End notes

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Notes

nus

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