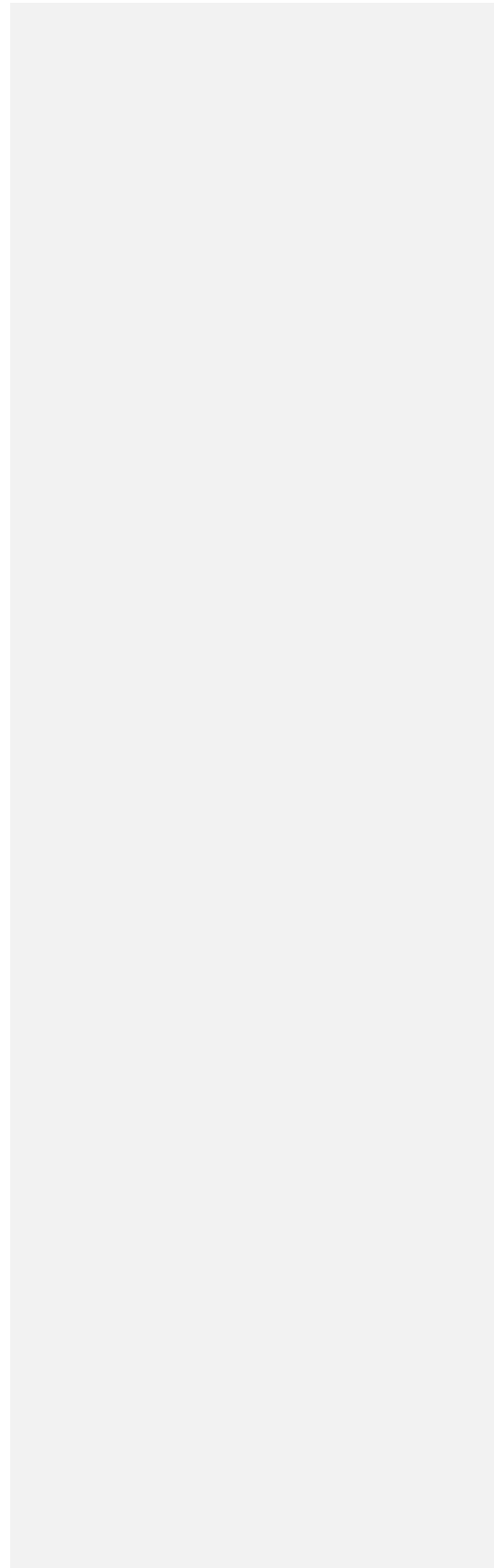**Leaving or Staying "Home" in a Time of Rupture: International Students' Experiences**

**of Loneliness and Social Isolation during COVID-19**

**Abstract**

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

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

In the academic year 2020/21, over 584,100 international students were studying at universities in the United Kingdom (UK), constituting 22% of the total student population (UK Government, 2022). In this paper, 'international student' refers to a person who has moved outside of their home country and who is enrolled at a university to complete an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (OECD, 2019). In the context of this paper, the term does not encompass credit mobile students who are studying at the university for a brief period of time as part of an international exchange programme (OECD, 2019).

> **Commented [A1]:** Thanks for the clarification as I believe it is really important. However, please make sure that the statistic used at the beginning (584,100 students) does not include 'credit mobile students.' It is quite common for national agencies to combine both types of students.

   The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes to everyday life and students' experiences in Higher Education. In the UK and Scotland, social distancing restrictions and self-isolation measures were introduced in March 2020, which remained in place to varying degrees until July 2021. These measures restricted face-to-face contact and travel and, subsequently, imposed additional costs (such as PCR travel tests) related to international travel, a "traffic light system" based on the COVID risk associated with countries, alongside a constant awareness that these rules and restrictions could change with short notice (Scottish Government, 2021). Although travel, at times, was restricted within the UK and Scotland, international students were more acutely affected by travel restrictions and their accompanying uncertainty; leaving them with the choice of either staying in Scotland or returning to their home countries without a clear idea of when they would be able to leave or return.

   Even before the pandemic, feelings of loneliness and social isolation were common amongst people in Scotland (Our Voice Citizen's Panel, 2017) and they have further increased as a result of the pandemic (Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2022). This study distinguishes between the concepts of loneliness and social isolation. In line with the definitions informing the Scottish Government's (2018) strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness in Scotland, loneliness refers to a "subjective feeling experienced when there

is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have and those we have" (p.
16). Social isolation, on the other hand, refers to when "an individual has an objective lack of
social relationships (in terms of quality and/or quantity) at individual, group, community and
societal levels" (p. 16). The two may be linked but not automatically or necessarily so – a
person who appears well connected may feel lonely or people who have few connections may
not feel lonely at all; the difference between them lies in the subjective and emotional
experience of loneliness.

> **Commented [A2]:** Great job in making clear the distinction!

Experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst international students
specifically are also well-documented, both before the pandemic and during it. However, no
study has so far explored the experiences of loneliness and social isolation amongst
international students in Scotland during COVID-19. Furthermore, the critical decision of
whether to stay or to leave, increased difficulties in building new relationships due to COVID
restrictions, intensified challenges related to mental health and the general sense of
unsettlement and disruption brought on by the pandemic presents a unique context to help us
better understand the challenges international students faced during this time of rupture. The
study will also contribute to the expanding body of research on experiences of loneliness and
social isolation amongst university students, and international students specifically.

> **Commented [A3]:** Please refer to
> Liu, X., Cogan, N., Colquhoun, E., McEwan, E., Moore, J., & Sly, S. (2021, June). The impact of COVID-19 on Chinese international students in Scotland. In *British Psychological Society Division of Health Psychology Annual Conference 2021*.

## Literature Review

Loneliness has long been considered endemic amongst international students,
internationally (Sawir et al., 2008) and within the UK, with Wavera and McCamely (2020)
reporting that 72% of the international students in their sample had felt lonely since coming
to the UK. Studies exploring international students' experiences in the UK have emphasised
how loneliness can emerge due to socio-political factors, such as stereotyping (Wee, 2019),
race (King et al., 2020) and cultural differences (Hernández López, 2020). International

research has also highlighted elements such as language barriers (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), challenges in building relationships with locals (Costello, 2015; Adewale et al., 2018) and homesickness (Wu & Hammond, 2011), which can make it difficult to build new relationships and support networks (Wavera & McCamley, 2020). Most international students live far away from their families and extended social circles and are, for that reason, more likely to experience social isolation than domestic students (Kivelä et al., 2022; Koo & Nyunt, 2022). However, over time most international students do build new support networks and a life in their new country (Sawir et al., 2008).

Evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on international students in the UK and internationally is emerging and has already received some notable attention (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021). In the UK, studies have shown how the pandemic negatively impacted international students' mental health (Al-Oraibi et al., 2022) and academic experience (Frampton et al., 2022). International research has further explored international student mobility (Yu, 2021), stress and coping amongst international graduate students (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022), sense of connection and belonging (Weng et al., 2021), the impact of restricted international travel (Whatley & Fisher, 2022) and fear over their own and others' health (Lai et al., 2020). Overall, having a limited social circle and social interaction, not being able to go back to their home country and feelings of homesickness have been found to result in experiences of loneliness and social isolation during this time (Koo & Nyunt, 2022).

Discussing the international travel restrictions imposed in the USA during the pandemic, Mbous et al. (2022) found that these restrictions were partially felt to be a relief amongst the international students in their sample, as it minimised the risk of them contaminating their families (see also Diamanti & Nikolaou, 2021). However, they also noted the impact of the increased price of flight tickets, which led some who would have liked to go

back to their home country to stay in the USA. Not being able to return was seen as contributing to feelings of homesickness, as they were geographically and intimately cut off from their families, which was accentuated by the uncertainty of when they would be able to go and – if they did leave –be able to return to the USA (Mbous et al., 2022). In discussing this, the participants noted the sense of "privilege" and "freedom" that their local peers had in comparison. Vasileiou et al.'s (2019) pre-pandemic finding, that many UK undergraduate students – not specifically international students – either visited home or knew that they could do so if needed to manage their feelings of loneliness, is notable in a context where this was not an accessible or viable remedy for such feelings. Furthermore, Scottish students highlighted that staying in contact with others was crucial to achieving a sense of normality during the pandemic, they also noted that this was easier for some than for others (Butler-Warke et al., 2021).

There are also accounts from international students who did return to their home country during the pandemic, noting the challenges that emerge when moving back into the family home. Diamanti and Nikolaou (2021) found that their participants – international students who returned to Greece during the pandemic – experienced emotional tensions arising from the coexistence with their families for an extended time. Similarly, Loh (2003) explored international students' construction of home and identity across cultures, discussing the "return culture shock" their participants felt when returning to their home country. For many of Loh's participants, their host country had become a second home where they had constructed a new identity, social group and routines. Much research has focused on identity construction amongst international students, with some arguing that many take on a hybrid-national identity (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Adewale et al., 2018) and a sense of personal growth after living in a different country (Costello, 2015). With this, identity construction is

not about international students assimilating to the new culture, but about negotiating and managing competing and dynamic identities (Gomes et al., 2014; Marginson, 2014).

Whilst previous work has addressed the notion of students returning to their home country or staying in their country of study during the pandemic, these studies have not discussed the underlying experience of rupture that shaped their decision and their managing of constraints and transitions in a time of both social and personal uncertainty. As such, this paper aims to examine the factors and experiences in this time of rupture (Holbraad et al., 2019) that contributed to international students' feelings of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19.

## Research Design

### Conceptual Framework

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

### Methodology and Methods

The study was qualitative and utilised a psycho-social, phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is built on the perception that "there is a relationship between the mind and

> **Commented [A4]:** Great framework!
>
> But then, how is this framework applied to this study beyond simply using it to classify the covid pandemic as a rupture? Could you possibly elaborate on that?

the world" (Howell, 2013, p. 55) and aims to generate understanding of a phenomenon or event through the experience of individuals, taking you "inside" that experience rather than explaining it. The data generation approach and method of analysis were interpretive, acknowledging that understandings and experiences are bound to, and informed by, social context and that meaning is continuously constructed and reproduced (Holloway, 1997).

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

The second phase involved focus groups with students that expanded on the questions explored in the questionnaire. We conducted four focus groups with a total of 12 students in July 2021 over MS Teams, in line with COVID guidelines at the time. The participants in the focus groups indicated that they were interested in taking part in a focus group in their response to the questionnaire. The focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured approach, with a set of questions as a guide for the conversation, whilst still allowing for flexibility (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The small number of participants, between 3 and 5 in each focus group, was beneficial in facilitating in-depth conversations that would not have been possible with bigger groups. This gave all participants the chance to speak about their experiences, reflect on the questions they were asked as well as pursue alternative lines of

conversation in significant detail. The length of the focus groups ranged from 1 hour 32 minutes to 2 hours and 22 minutes. The discussions were transcribed verbatim, and all participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. The study was granted ethical approval by the university's ethics committee, and we adhered to principles of ethical research practice in all phases of the research.

The approach of the focus groups allowed us to form a broad understanding of loneliness and social isolation amongst the students, as well as an in-depth awareness of specific subjective aspects of the students', lived experiences. This combination of methods captured the breadth and complexity of these experiences (Creswell, 2006). The focus group data were analysed first using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with coding and identification of key themes and subthemes being identified individually by the researchers initially and then discussed, analysed and coded collectively. The qualitative comments from the questionnaires were then organised into the themes as appropriate, and accounts of experiences that had not come up in the focus groups were maintained as subthemes.

**Participants**

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

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

---

**Commented [A5]:** Please clarify whether these focus groups were also among "all students" or only international students. It is a bit confusing since you mention that this article is part of a larger project that was not just intended to gather responses from international students.

**Commented [A6]:** Was there any specific strategy to increase inter-rater reliability?

**Commented [A7]:** But then how do you know these are not 'credit mobile students' as you indicated in the first paragraph?

**Commented [A8]:** This answers the question I posed earlier. Still, I suggest you clarify this sooner in the article to avoid any confusion.

broadly fit into two groups: the first group is characterised by having stayed in Scotland during the pandemic and the second by having returned to their home country.

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

## Limitations

There are two key limitations associated with this study that can be considered in future research. Firstly, had we explicitly asked students to identify as an international student in the questionnaire this would have provided a clearer idea of who belonged to that category, as opposed to using their response to ask them to identity their country of origin. Secondly, most international students in this study were white European and would be categorised as EU students. As such, a more diverse (geographical and cultural) sample of participants could provide deeper insights into experiences across students under the international student umbrella.

### Results and Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented societal rupture (Holbraad et al., 2019) that has irrevocably shaped international students' lives and experiences at university. Underlying the participants' accounts in this study was the experience of a lack and loss of control and a sense of disconnection through the rupture of normalcy. Equally, however, are numerous instances of reorientation to – necessarily – deal with the situation at hand. The

**Commented [A9]:** How many students in each group? You only have 6 international students in the sample, correct? Dividing them in two groups will make this study's sample quite small...

**Commented [A10]:** Did you ask for race or is this also an assumption based on a question or on the researchers' observations during the focus group?

**Commented [A11]:** It is great that you acknowledge these limitations (I would also add the sample size). However, as opposed to simply acknowledging these and mentioning its implication for future studies, I think you can and should address how are these limitations being addressed in this paper.

thematic analysis of the data has resulted in three themes, all focused on instances and factors that resulted in feelings of loneliness and social isolation amongst the participants. Each theme has been framed around the concept of rupture and, as such, the themes are interlinked and not perceived as separate and disconnected entities. Together they provide an insight into, and conceptual understanding of, the distinct experiences of these international students in a time of rupture. The three themes are: 1) Liminal Friends and Strangers, 2) Sense of Home and Family, and 3) Staying or Leaving the Country.

**Liminal Friends and Strangers**

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

Considering both loneliness and social isolation, previous studies have acknowledged that some groups of students – notably international students – are prone to experience both during their time at university (Kivelä et al., 2022). During COVID-19, the awareness of such experiences amongst students gained increased attention, bringing "a longstanding issue into the open" (Philips et al., 2022, p. 289). However, several participants in this study expressed that there was still a lack of understanding regarding how loneliness and social isolation are experienced among international students. One student commented:

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

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

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

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

The participants' accounts reveal, in many cases, shared experiences of a sense of detachment and separation from other people, both in the subjective experience of loneliness as well as a lack of relationships in socially isolation terms. Such experiences were particularly prominent amongst the participants who had recently arrived in Scotland.

However, as opposed to previous studies, those experiences did not emerge from the feeling of a lack of interest from local peers (Costello, 2015; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017) or socio-political barriers (Wee, 2019) making it difficult to build relationships, but were largely due to the disruption that the pandemic caused in terms of restricting face-to-face opportunities to do so. In considering rupture, then, Clara's comment illustrates how in the months before the pandemic she started to develop relationships and a support network but that the process of doing so was disrupted by the onset of the pandemic. This rupture – not only social but also personal – required her to reorient herself within these relationships, particularly as opportunities to develop them "organically" in a university context (such as in, before and after classes) were restricted, at times removed completely.

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

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

want to form any close connections to new people because I was going to leave at some point anyway. (Johanna)

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

**Sense of Home and Family**

Central to many participants' comments was that of the notion of home. Informing the findings is Jackson's (1995, p. 148) definition of home as "grounded less in a place and more in the activity that occurs in the place"; home is an active process, that is (re-)created and enacted. Equally, the participants repeatedly spoke about the notion of family in relation to home which is similarly reflected in the discussion.

International students had already experienced several instances of rupture and transition before the pandemic; in most cases to a greater extent than their domestic peers. Not only had they experienced the transition into Higher Education, but also into a different country, often with a different culture and language, that required them to leave their support network behind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this became further amplified due to lockdown, other related restrictions and general uncertainty. To some degree, these multiple

periods of transition and having gone through them had already made international students feel a sense of strength and resilience – in that sense, as Holbraad et al. (2019, p. 1), notes "ruptures are moments at which value emerges through a break with something". For example, for many of them feelings of loneliness and social isolation were not new:

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

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

**Commented [A13]:** It's Pérez...

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

> You invest so much in the people that you connect with at uni, like because it's like you really invest and sort of building your chosen family and home, just to be really cheesy (…) It felt very lonely being back home even though I was surrounded by people; just see the fact that they couldn't really relate to my issues and I couldn't really relate to theirs either (…) When you then go back to living

with someone… you know my political opinions have changed, they're way

stronger and they don't necessarily match those of my family and then obviously

that they didn't witness that change happen (…) So that was a bit difficult to

navigate. At one point I just had to choose to be like, 'OK, I'm not leaving here

anytime soon, so in order to keep the peace just you know, let it let it go, just be

whoever I was and am on the inside, let that just be' and have an internal voice and

then just brush over the things because it's it wasn't worth going into. (Freja)

Many of the experiences summed up by Freja in this rich extract were shared amongst

several participants. Notably, her comment aligns with those who have discussed that some

international students experience there to be a "regression to a former self" when they return

to their home county (Loh, 2003, p. 66). However, as opposed to previous research on

returning home, or being a 'Homecomer' (Schutz, 1945), international students in this case

returned home unexpectedly; it was not an end to their international study experience – they

were in the middle of it. Being a Homecomer involves returning home, not as an exact copy

of the person they were when they left because of the "irreversibility of inner time" (Schutz,

1945, p. 114). Thereby, as previous studies have found (Loh, 2003; Diamanti & Nikolaou,

2021), Freja's feeling that the discrepancy between whom she and her family perceive her to

be is different, as they did not see that change happen.

Relatedly, Riemann (2022) noted that some of their participants found it "suffocating"

to be back in their old and familiar structures when returning to their home country after

spending time away. Like Freja, they found that some people tried to mould them back into

the person they had been before they left and that they were unwilling to accept how much

they had changed during their time abroad (Riemann, 2022). Furthermore, as Freja was still –

although from a distance – an international student and not someone who *had been* an

international student, she and other international students had to manage these two 'selves'
and worlds simultaneously.

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

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

With people who were part of her support network having left, then, altered her
feeling of home. These changes occur to most students at the end of their time at university
but experiencing it before such an end because of a sudden societal rupture, in a context
where it is more difficult than usual to build new relationships, can be a significant strain on
students' sense of belonging.

**Staying or Leaving the Country**

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

warning – making international travel risky for international students (Mbous et al., 2022).
Diana, who stayed in Scotland during the pandemic, reflected on the new risk attached to
seeing her family:

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

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

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

> For me I really struggle with, like, why are you [the Government] opening up
> travel to countries that bring you money as a government but you're not thinking
> about the people who don't have family here? In the beginning it [lockdown] was
> okay, I've been away from my family for long periods of time before […] but I'm
> now in this position where I'm going: 'when can I go back home?'. There's now

talk about all this 'you won't have to quarantine anymore!'. That's all fine but you still need [PCR travel] tests. I can't afford the tests and that's really getting to me and that's really impacting my feeling of loneliness because I feel isolated from my family and I feel isolated from the connections I have in Germany and I feel isolated from even being able to go when it should be possible. That's really adding to my loneliness and to my feeling of... I just don't know when it's going to be possible. (Alexandra)

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

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

During reading week [mid-October] I went back home due to some personal reasons and then it was getting really hard to find flights to come back and so I was like 'oh well, what am I gonna do? Am I risking spending, you know, Christmas apart from my family if I go, or do I stay here and cancel my room at university and just stay with my family until better times?'. That was quite a hard decision for me because I was really happy at uni. I had a few friends in my course and we kind

of made do of the situation (… ) I think that I would have felt very lonely if I had

stayed at uni over the Christmas period, but being very close with my family I

didn't really feel isolated at all. But I would have liked to go back to Scotland

earlier, I moved back in April. (Steffi)

Steffi's experience of choosing between staying or leaving her country of study is

mirrored by other international students during the pandemic; particularly the uncertainty

regarding when they would be able to return if they did choose to leave (Sustarsuc & Zhang,

2022).

What these accounts of constraints related to international travel tell us about these

students' feelings of loneliness and social isolation is how imposed, changed and constantly

changing constraints and restrictions can affect their sense of control over their lives, their

relationships and connections. The sense of rupture, a complete change of normalcy caused

by the pandemic, affect all students – including international students unequally; and made it

impossible for some to return to their families if they would have wished to do so.


**Conclusion**

This study aligns with existing research that emphasises the common experience of loneliness

and social isolation amongst international students. Our findings contribute to this body of

research by further enhancing the awareness of tangible factors and experiences, on both

personal and emotional (e.g., 'sense of home') and structural (e.g., increased costs related to

travel) levels, that contributed to such feelings amongst international students in Scotland

during COVID-19. Analysing the data through the prism of rupture provided further insights

into how the corrosion and discontinuity of normalcy affected this specific student group, and

how messages of "we are in this together" – for some international students – were perceived

as generating an increased sense of isolation due to the unique challenges that they were

facing. The awareness of risks and the financial elements that contributed to some international students' feelings of loneliness and social isolation in this context must not be undermined. As such, we highlight the need to raise awareness of the unique experiences of this student group.

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

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

**References**

Authors (2022) – Retracted

Adewale, T., D'Amico, M. M., & Salas, S. (2018). "It's kinda weird": Hybrid identities in the international undergraduate community. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(2), 861–883. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i2.118

Al-Oraibi, A., Fothergill, L., Yildirim, M., Knight, H., Carlisle, S., O'Connor, M., Briggs, L., Morling, J. R., Corner, J., Ball, J. K., Denning, C., Vedhara, K., & Blake, H. (2022). Exploring the psychological impacts of COVID-19 social restrictions on international university students: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(13), 7631. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137631

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Butler-Warke, A., Mueller-Hirth, N., Woods, R. & Timmins, S. (2021). *Student experiences of COVID and lockdown: institutional report*. Aberdeen: Robert Gordon University. https://rgu-repository.worktribe.com/output/1391543

Costello, J. (2015). Students' stories of studying abroad: Reflections upon return. *Journal of International Students*, *5*(1), 50–59. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i1.442

Creswell, J. W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Diamanti, K., & Nikolaou, S. M. (2021). Researching the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students in Greece. *European Journal of Development Studies*, *1*(3), 26–32. https://doi.org/10.24018/ejdevelop.2021.1.3.35

Duran, A., & Pérez II, D. (2018). The multiple roles of chosen familia: Exploring the interconnections of queer Latino men's community cultural wealth. *International*

*Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *32*(1), 67–84.

https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1523484

Frampton, N., Smith, J. & Smithies, D. (2022). *Understanding student mental health inequalities: International students*. Student Minds. https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/2022_international_students_report_final.pdf

Gomes, C., Berry, M., Alzougool, B., & Chang, S. (2014). Home away from home: International students and their identity-based social networks in Australia. *Journal of International Students*, *4*(1), 2–15. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v4i1.493

Gomes, C., & Forbes-Mewett, H. (2021). International students in the time of COVID-19. *Journal of International Students*, *11*(s2), 1-5. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11is2.4292

Gu, Q., & Schweisfurth, M. (2015). Transnational connections, competences and identities: experiences of Chinese international students after their return 'home.' *British Educational Research Journal*, *41*(6), 947–970. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3175

Hernández López, E. M. (2020). Challenges facing Mexican students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of International Students*, *10*(4), 1005–1022. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i4.1193

Holbraad, M., Kapferer, B., & Sauma, J. F. (2019). *Ruptures: Anthropologies of discontinuity in Times of Turmoil*. London: UCL Press.

Holloway, I. (1997). *Basic concepts for qualitative research*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Howell, K. E. (2013). *An Introduction to the philosophy of methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Jackson, M. (1995). *At Home in the world.* Sydney: Harper Perennial.

King, J. A., Cabarkapa, S., Leow, F. H., & Ng, C. H. (2020). Addressing international student

    mental health during COVID-19: An imperative overdue. *Australasian*

    *Psychiatry*, *28*(4), 469. https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856220926934

Kivelä, L., Mouthaan, J., van der Does, W., & Antypa, N. (2022). Student mental health

    during the COVID-19 pandemic: Are international students more affected? *Journal of*

    *American College Health*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2037616

Koo, K., & Nyunt, G. (2022). Pandemic in a foreign country: Barriers to international

    students' well-being during COVID-19. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and*

    *Practice*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2022.2056476

Lai, A. Y. K., Lee, L., Wang, M. P., Feng, Y., Lai, T. T. K., Ho, L. M., Lam, V. S. F., Ip, M.

    S. M., & Lam, T. H. (2020). Mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on

    international university students, related stressors, and coping strategies. *Frontiers in*

    *Psychiatry*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.584240

Loh, B. (2003). *Constructing home and identity across cultures: The culture shock and return*

    *culture shock experience of international students* [Master Thesis, Carleton

    University]. CURVE. https://curve.carleton.ca/dc56b3a0-8e91-4e21-9f80-

    302a995435ad

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in*

    *International Education*, *18*(1), 6–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036

Mbous, Y. P. V., Mohamed, R., & Rudisill, T. M. (2022). International students' challenges

    during the COVID-19 pandemic in a university in the United States: A focus group

    study. *Current Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-02776-x

McIntosh, M. J., & Morse, J. M. (2015). Situating and constructing diversity in semi-

    structured interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, *2*.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393615597674

McKenzie, L., & Baldassar, L. (2017). Missing friendships: Understanding the absent

relationships of local and international students at an Australian university. *Higher

Education*, *74*(4), 701–715. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0073-1

Mental Health Foundation Scotland (2022). *All the lonely people*.

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHAW22-Loneliness-

Scotland-Report.pdf

OECD (2019) *Indicator B6: What is the profile of internationally mobile students?* OECD

Library. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/17d19cd9-

en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/17d19cd9-en

Our Voice Citizen's Panel (2017). *Survey on relationships with health and social care

professionals, shared decision-making, how loneliness affects people in Scotland, and

how well services are working locally*.

https://www.ourvoice.scot/697/documents/1058

Phillips, R., Seaborne, K., Goldsmith, A., Curtis, N., Davies, A., Haynes, W., McEnroe, R.,

Murphy, N., O'Neill, L., Pacey, C., Walker, E., & Wordley, E. (2022). Student

loneliness through the pandemic: How, why and where? *The Geographical

Journal*, *188*(2), 277–293. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12438

Riemann, M. (2022). *Leaving Spain: A biographical study of an economic crisis and new

beginnings*. Leuven University Press.

Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and

International Students: An Australian Study. *Journal of Studies in International

Education*, *12*(2), 148–180. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307299699

Schutz, A. (1945). The Homecomer. *American Journal of Sociology*, *50*(5), 369–376.

https://doi.org/10.1086/219654

Scottish Government (2018). *A connected Scotland: Our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections.* https://www.gov.scot/publications/connected-scotland-strategy-tackling-social-isolation-loneliness-building-stronger-social-connections/documents/

Scottish Government (2022) Coronavirus (COVID-19): International travel [accessed 28 July 2022]. https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-international-travel-quarantine/

Scottish Government (2021). *International travel restrictions to be relaxed and simplified.* Scottish Government News. https://www.gov.scot/news/international-travel-restrictions-to-be-relaxed-and-simplified/

Seo, S.N. (2022). The COVID-19 Pandemic as a globally shared experience: An introduction. In S.N. Seo (Ed.), *The Economics of Pandemics* (pp. 1-44) https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-91021-1.pdf

Shaw, L. (2021). On rupture: Establishing the cognitive bases of social change. *Sociological Forum*, *36*(S1), 1229–1252. https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12766

Simmel, G., 1964. Individual and society in eighteenth and nineteenth century views of life. In K.H. Wolff (Ed.), *The sociology of Georg Simmel* (pp. 58-84). New York: Free Press.

Skyrme, G. (2007). Entering the university: The differentiated experience of two Chinese international students in a New Zealand university. *Studies in Higher Education*, *32*(3), 357–372. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701346915

Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *35*(6), 699–713. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004

Study.eu (2020). *Tuition fees in Scotland: Everything you need to know* [accessed 28 July

    2022]. https://www.study.eu/article/tuition-fees-in-scotland

Sustarsic, M., & Zhang, J. (2021). Navigating through uncertainty in the era of COVID-

    19. *Journal of International Students*, *12*(1), 61–80.

    https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i1.3305

UK Government (2022). *International students in UK higher education: FAQs.* Research

    Briefing. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7976/

Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Barreto, M., Vines, J., Atkinson, M., Long, K., Bakewell, L.,

    Lawson, S., & Wilson, M. (2019). Coping with loneliness at university: A qualitative

    interview study with students in the UK. *Mental Health & Prevention*, *13*, 21–30.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2018.11.002

Wawera, A. S., & McCamley, A. (2019). Loneliness among international students in the

    UK. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *44*(9), 1262–1274.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1673326

Wee, A. (2019). Space and identity construction. *Journal of International Students*, *9*(2),

    384–411. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.643

Weng, E., Halafoff, A., Barton, G., & Smith, G. (2021). Higher education, exclusion, and

    belonging. *Journal of International Students*, *11*(S2).

    https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11is2.3553

Whatley, M. & Fisher, H. (2021). International student experience at US community Colleges

    at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of International Students*, *12*(1).

    https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i1.3359

Wu, W., & Hammond, M. (2011). Challenges of university adjustment in the UK: A study of

    East Asian Master's degree students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *35*(3),

    423–438. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2011.569016

Yu, J. (2021). Lost in lockdown? *Journal of International Students*, *11*(S2).

https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11is2.3575