Reducing Social Isolation and Loneliness through Technological Communication

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Synopsis

In response to globalisation, the number of students engaging in studies abroad and cross-cultural living has significantly increased. This paper explores the extent to which social isolation and loneliness is evident within international student' cohorts, and further examines the advantages of using technological communication to decrease the feeling of social isolation and loneliness within international student groups. The advantages and disadvantages of applying different methods of technological communication will be evaluated, whilst focussing on the effectiveness and efficiency of the technology from a student and a staff perspective. The particular forms of technological communication examined include: web-based newsletters and online discussion boards and announcement pages.

Experiences gained by the International Student Support staff at one of the University of Newcastle's smaller campuses is triangulated with quantitative and qualitative data gathered from students across the University.

Keywords

International students, social isolation, loneliness, technology, communication

Introduction

In 2004 there were 228 555 international students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions (Department of Employment, Science and Training, 2005; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). Two thirds of this cohort is documented to have experienced problems of loneliness and social isolation, primarily during the earlier months of their study time in Australia (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia, 2005). These figures further indicate that the assistance and support provided by Australian universities both pre and post arrival has the potential to modify the incidence of acculturation stress, loneliness and the feeling of social isolation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995 cited in Sawir et al, 2005) through providing a range of direct support in addition to supporting students to network, adjusting socially and culturally (Baloglu, 2000).

Globally, nationally and locally an advance in the availability and use of technological applications has been evident. These technologies are accessible, commonly used and widespread within international student cohorts and include, yet are not limited to instant messaging; online chat rooms; social networking sites such as Face Book and My Space; online journals; blogs; video clips and pod casts; and the more traditional mobile phone SMS and MMS; and email programmes. Traditionally these technological applications could be defined as serving an entertainment purpose, yet are now understood as a primary form of communication and a networking tool.

This paper will examine the extent to which international student cohorts at The University of Newcastle campuses report feelings of social isolation and loneliness during their studies in Australia, plus identifying the more challenging periods of their stay. Furthermore, studies conducted amongst the same samples will identify the extent to which different forms of currently used technological applications are self-reported to support individuals in decreasing their levels of social isolation, stress acculturation and loneliness during their period of study. Additional studies will identify the perceived extent to which the potential implementation of certain technological applications will have on facilitating social networking, personal development and well being during this period of adjustment.

The study

The data presented in this paper is taken from two studies carried out at the University of Newcastle in 2008. Both studies involved undergraduate and postgraduate international students.

Study One consisted of voluntary and anonymous participation in an online, web-based questionnaire produced and sent electronically to students' university email accounts. Two hundred and fifty eight (258) students participated in the study with 78% of students studying at the Callaghan campus, 11% at the city campus and 11% of students being from the Central Coast campus. The study consisted of both male and female students from a range of cultural and language backgrounds. The sample consisted of 35% first year students, 13% second year students, 22% third year and 30% in their fourth year or more of their studies. 76% of the sample was from an ESL background and 23% of the sample was from a non-ESL background, 0% was unspecified.

Study Two consisted of data collated from an internal online learning tool, 'Blackboard', which is currently used by The University of Newcastle across all campuses. Blackboard also functions as a discussion and communications board for international students at the Central Coast Campus where student numbers are relatively small (<100). Statistics were sourced over a three- month period ranging June to August, 2008. The statistics gathered included data identifying the number of users and the frequency and peak time of the programme's use. All data was anonymous specifying application use by the whole cohort only.

Discussion

The background behind studying abroad and the cultural adjustment

It has been stated that an international student living abroad often has an emotional experience accompanied by a myriad of stressors, ranging from biological, cultural or functional in nature. Biological stressors may include diet, illness, homesickness and isolation (Ying 2005) and cultural stressors most commonly involve the student feeling a compromise in personal or cultural values or are experienced as a result of racism or discrimination (Ying and Han, 2006). Additionally, functional stressors may include issues surrounding language and communication, work, finances and transportation (Ryan and Twibell, 2000).

It has been further stated that the cycle of homesickness and acculturation stress, 'the psychological and physical discomfort experienced as a result of adjusting to a new cultural environment', is further exacerbated by social isolation and loneliness (Hannigan, 1990); in addition, these factors can affect the longevity of the student's period of acculturation stress. Studies show that students studying abroad are primarily affected by feelings of social isolation and loneliness during there first six-months abroad (Ying and Han, 2006).

Similarly, results from Study One revealed that when students were asked:

"Do you feel you have experienced a period of social isolation or loneliness and if yes, at what period of your stay and for how long?"

Seventy eight percent (78%) of students (n= 258) stated they had suffered a period of social isolation and loneliness, with 60% of these students indicating that they suffered these feelings during the first 3-6 months of their stay in Australia and the remaining responses highlighting the experience of loneliness being heightened during holiday periods, on birthdays and during transitions between English language courses and degree programmes. Twenty three percent (23%) of participants surveyed did not respond to this question.
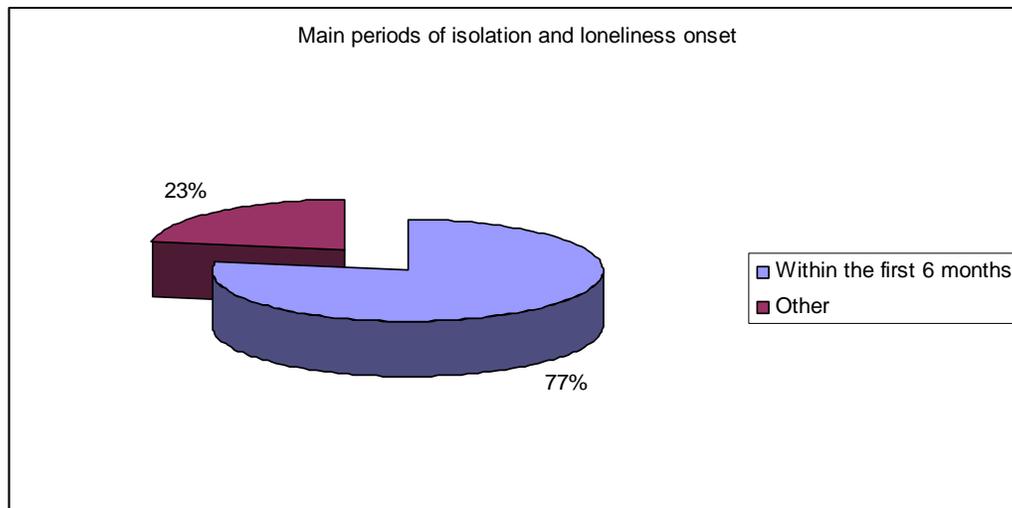

Figure 1. The time period that students felt they suffered an onset of social isolation and loneliness; n= 258.

Ady (1995) suggests that in order for international students to adjust culturally and decrease their risk of social isolation and loneliness, they must endure an element of culture shock, satisfaction, academic success, cultural competence, financial stress, social competence, and positive personal growth.

While attempting to manage and overcome these stressors, students are often inhibited from independently and actively seeking social relationships. Furukawa, Sarason and Sarason, (1998) highlight that this decrease in the ability to seek social relationships further results in poor adjustment

and a lack of general well being within the international student (Ying 2002a). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also claim that increased levels of satisfaction with feelings of belonging results in decreased loneliness and therefore highlights that an inability to seek and maintain a social networks can result in an inability to self-manage loneliness.

One respondent in Study One stated that:

"Although I attempt to make the first move by smiling, people are not friendly to me, I cry every night and after one year now have made some friends, things are a lot better".
(Study 1, Q18, The University of Newcastle, International Student Support Unit, 2008).

In response to these feelings of loneliness and social isolation, students will either apply self-management strategies to address their loneliness or explore strategies to seek professional or institutional assistance. Similarly, figure 2. indicates that 62% of respondents in Study One (n=258) reported feeling 'very responsible' for their feelings of loneliness and isolation with 36% feeling that having no friends in Australia was 'very responsible' for their level of loneliness and isolation. Fifty two percent (52%) of respondents also reported that they encountered difficulties making friends during their first few months in Australia.
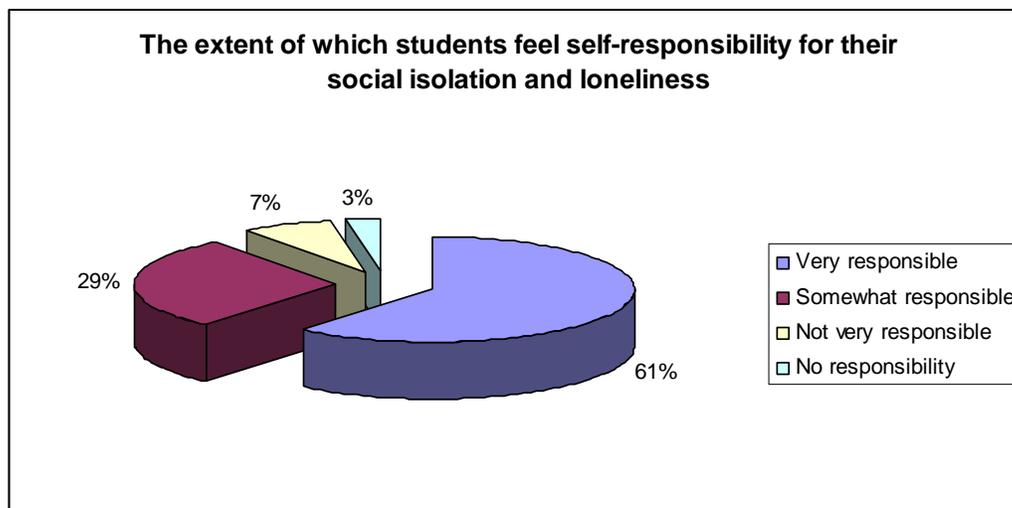

The extent of which students feel self-responsibility for their social isolation and loneliness

7%   3%

29%

61%

- Very responsible
- Somewhat responsible
- Not very responsible
- No responsibility

Figure 2. The extent to which international students felt personally responsible for their social isolation and loneliness.
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Moroi (1986) claimed that in most cases the intensity of these experiences diminish as the student's expectations and patterns of life change and they learn to cope and extend their social circles to make new friends. This is further supported by our findings where only 23% of respondents reported these feelings in periods outside of their initial 6-12 months of study (Refer to figure 1). Similarly it was reported by 77% of the sample that they were dependent on other students to make social networks; with 87% of students reporting that their response to their loneliness was to access social events and services within the institution. However if this social networking does not occur, either through self-help or institutional assistance, the student's loneliness becomes emotionally entrenched as social alienation (Moroi, 1986), thus highlighting the importance of supporting international students through this transition.

One method that the University of Newcastle, Central Coast Campus has implemented with the aim of further supporting students to achieve more positive outcomes is to increase communication via networking technologies; both within student cohorts and between student cohorts and providers. These technologies have been implemented with the aim of enabling and supporting students to join and maintain social networks and therefore maximise their sense of belonging and involvement in organised events. This method has been found to be both time efficient and financially viable from the providers' perspective in addition to being an accepted and widespread generational form of communication amongst a high proportion of the international student cohort (Refer to figure 3).
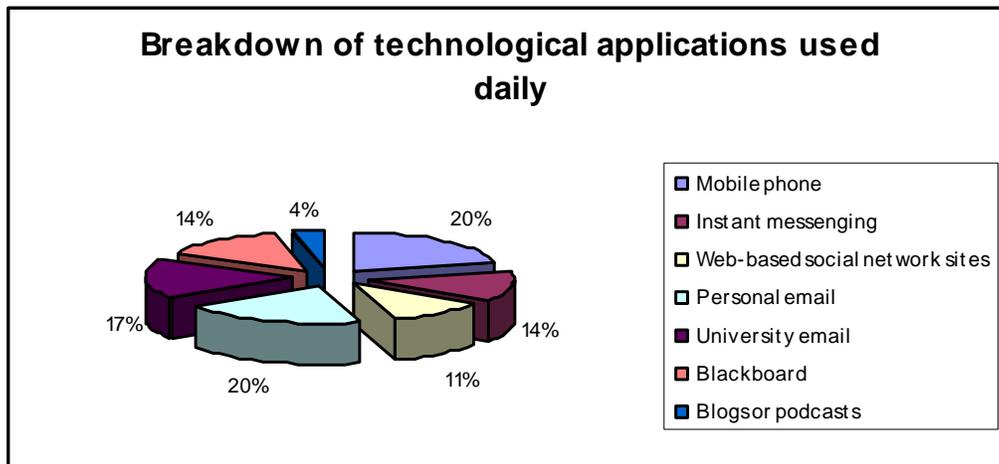
Figure 3. A breakdown of commonly used technologies and the frequency of their use (n=258).

Technology for the purpose of social networking

Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000) claim that support from native friends reduces emotional stress in students, furthermore, facilitating functional adjustment within international student cohorts. This reinforces the need for institutions to develop a strong social networking program that enables social networks to be formed and maintained within new student cohorts and between existing and new student cohorts (Westwood and Barker, 1990). All respondents in Study One (n=258) reported having access to and use at least one type of current technology daily. Eighty one percent (81%) of these students believed that contemporary technologies decreased their social isolation and loneliness. This contrasts with the remaining 19% who felt that access and use of these technologies increased their sense of loneliness and yearning for home as they were more aware of what was going on amongst native friends and family.

Walton (1990) states that in order to manage and support international students and their emotional needs through their main periods of isolation, loneliness and home sickness it is important, as a provider, to assist students in developing skills in self-reliance. Walton adds that the development of these skills may be as fundamental as assisting students in developing a list of things to do over a weekend, in the holiday breaks or having access to other students' contact details so that they can contact each other. This is supported by results of Study One (n=258) where 87% of students surveyed looked to social avenues to decrease isolation and loneliness and when asked if they used online applications during this time of loneliness, 72% reported 'yes'.

In addition to applying technological applications to increase opportunities for social networking and event participation, their application can also be attributed to assisting students in self-disclosure, referring to the communication of personal information, thoughts, and feelings (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis, 1993; cited in Qian and Scott, 2007).
Self-disclosure has been documented as important in enabling students to establish an identity in their new environment and therefore assists students in managing social isolation and loneliness. Chickering and Reisser (1993) comment that in order for students to establish an identity abroad they are required to develop confidence in bonding with others and thus develop their self-esteem as an individual without familiar networks.

Despite self-disclosure playing an important role in intimacy development and interpersonal exchanges (Perlman and Fehr, 1987; cited in Qian and Scott, 2007), Quin and Scott (2007) state that it is often confronting for individuals, and especially international students who are unfamiliar with their new environment and networks, to bring themselves to reveal their feelings and personal thoughts. It has therefore been suggested that a pathway into self-disclosure may be disclosure via technological applications that allow anonymity. Quin and Scott believe that if students are enabled to self-disclose anonymously they will develop confidence and a feeling of acceptance within their newly found

network and will slowly choose to self-disclose without electing for anonymity. Furthermore, stating that self-disclosure is lower amongst participants that disclose a higher amount of identification.

In 2008, the University of Newcastle's, Central Coast Campus piloted the use of the online learning tool 'Blackboard' to assist in meeting the social needs of its international student cohort. Blackboard has traditionally been used in academic courses to host course outlines, reading materials, student' grades, provide contact details of staff members and enable discussion between students and academics on course subject and material.

Outside of this traditional application the International Student Support Officer implemented an online 'Black board' course with the aim of providing an opportunity for students to access each other's email details, view announcements on upcoming events, and contribute to online discussion through the ability to post comments and feedback on current subjects. Students were added to the international student group manually by staff once they had enrolled at the University. While labour intensive, the small number of students at this campus made this additional task achievable.

There were distinct advantages in utilising Blackboard for this purpose. The technology was familiar to all students and the discussion board could be monitored and managed by staff. There were however, some teething problems in the initial application of the technology. Students had grown accustomed to using Blackboard for academic purposes and needed encouragement to extend this use to social networking. Its success also relied on them actively seeking out the site and browsing its content. Furthermore, the formal structure of the site inhibited student self-disclosure. At one point, the site was modified to allow anonymous discussions to take place. This proved problematic as some students logged inappropriate comments which had to be quickly removed. This required greater vigilance of staff and proved to be counter-productive in facilitating user friendships. On the flip-side however, it protected student identity. Following these episodes, the anonymity feature was removed and comments resumed with more appropriate content. This created a further complication when the offending student used the email address book on the Blackboard site to recruit students to a separate website where the in appropriate comments continued.

Despite anonymity encouraging self-disclosure amongst students that may not otherwise disclose information, when applying anonymity to technological applications it has been highlighted that the degree to which censorship takes place must be considered. Jessup, Connoly, and Galegher (1990) have stated that anonymity can be associated with a higher level of anti-social online behaviours or a fostering of group norm violations (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel and de Groot, 2001).

Technological applications that enable students to self-disclose, either anonymously or as an identified individual, include, yet are not limited to; pod casts (audio or visual), discussion boards, blogs and online journals, these applications also have the potential for users to control access to their blogs so as to use these functions as an electronic personal diary (Qian and Scott, 2007). These applications allow students to express their feelings and share their experiences with others in addition to sharing the experiences and feelings of others and may also decrease feelings of need to disclose to friends or family in their home country as disclosing online can provide the similar emotional release (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Bortree, 2005). Furthermore Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) have highlighted that these applications can provide an opportunity for relationship construction.

Study Two revealed that during the three month period, May to July 2008, 57% of international students at the Central Coast Campus utilised Blackboard for social networking and discussion. Around 57% of these Blackboard users posted comments on the site. While the remaining students did not log comments, they were interested enough to check out what other international students had to say. (Refer to figure 6). This figure indicates the value in the knowledge that other students share in the experience and feelings of living and studying abroad and assists students to identify with a new culture and group and feel a sense of community (Chin and Chignell, 2006). Supporting this finding, Study One indicated that 67% of students felt that reading or hearing other student's experiences through the form of online journals, blogs, and post boards decreased their feeling of social isolation and loneliness.
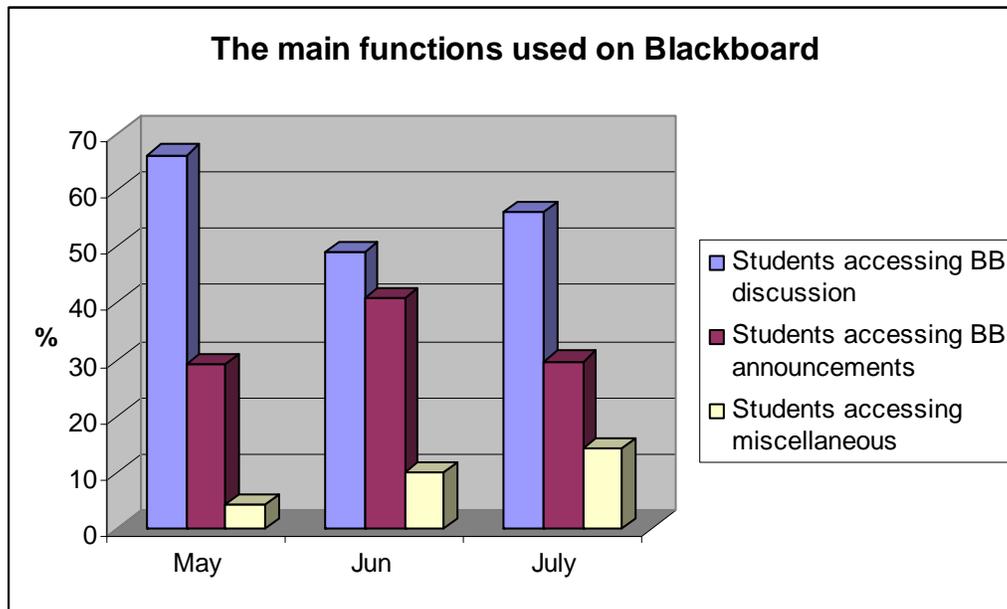
The main functions used on Blackboard

Figure 5. *Percentage of students accessing discussion function on Blackboard*

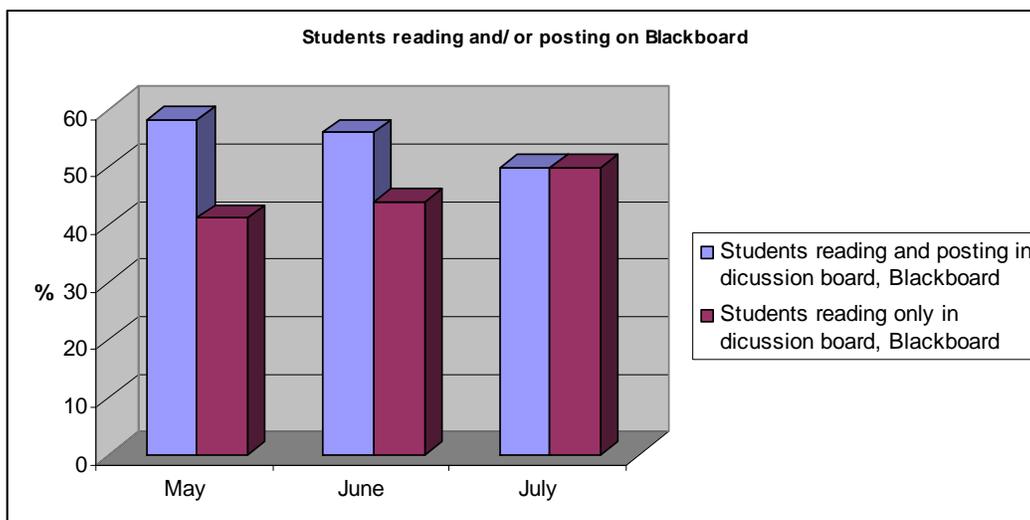**Students reading and/ or posting on Blackboard**

Figure 6. *Percentage of students' posting and reading Black board posts*

Despite the benefits derived from their involvement in these technologies, concerns have also been raised in regard to the displaced valuable time that could be spent face to face with friends as opposed to spending time networking online (Kraut 1998 cited in Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). However it has been alternatively argued by Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, and Smallwood (2006) that online communication enhances existing friendships and assists relationships to develop more meaningful roots as self-disclosure is more prevalent. It is also important to note that these technological applications can be used simultaneously to face to face social and networking activities, similarly these applications can assist students in developing self-esteem and skills in self disclosure with the aim to develop confidence to network in their real and not virtual communities.

Monthly communications via emailed online newsletters was also introduced to students on the Central Coast Campus in 2008. It aimed to promote networking activities and events to students in an attempt

to try and increase their involvement and decrease their isolation and loneliness. One advantage of the newsletter is that it is delivered directly to the student's email account, and therefore the receiving of announcements is not dependent on the student perusing a site, further the newsletter opens directly in the student's mail and is not required to be opened as an attachment. An additional function of the newsletter is its ability to address each student individually through an introductory greeting such as; 'Welcome back to semester two Jenny', creating a feeling of individuality and intimacy. Some students, unaware that this is a function of the application have commented;

'I love your newsletters and I feel special knowing that you have taken time to write my name although I am one of many students, it must take you so long!' (University of Newcastle international student, 2007).

Although this student was then informed of the newsletter's automatic function that allows this insertion of individual names, the initial impression that they are considered as an individual has been made. The web-based function also allows the newsletter to have live links and anchors therefore enabling the content to remain brief with a live link to off site web-sites to allow interested students to access more information, for example a newsletter may contain a small paragraph about a national holiday with links to related government or historical websites. The links can also be used as an email function, allowing students to click a link to email a contact, perhaps to make an inquiry or RSVP to an event. Similarly anchors allow the student to look through the content of the newsletter and click on a particular heading and be taken to that part of the newsletter, perhaps increasing the chance of students reading the sections particular to them as opposed to being bombarded with having to read through less relevant text to find the section they are interested in.

The application however is dependent on manually adding and deleting students from the address book upon enrolling and graduating. This task can be time consuming and may affect the efficiency of the programme within a larger student cohort. Similarly if student email accounts are full, the sending of the newsletter to that account will fail, however in association with other announcement type-sites, online newsletters are a great method of communication.

Conclusion and recommendations

It can be concluded that the majority of international students suffer social isolation and loneliness associated with stress and acculturation, primarily during the first months post-arrival and during study breaks. Although studies indicate that a significant number of students believe that they themselves are responsible for managing these feelings of adjustment, there is also a large number who believe the education provider is also significantly responsible for providing adequate support to decrease these emotional experiences of isolation. Additionally it has been found that some students lack sufficient experience, knowledge and skills, which are required to self-manage the transition and the accompanied emotional stress. One method that has been highlighted as being successful in decreasing these feelings of isolation and loneliness is by providing communication opportunities for students to meet and network with fellow peers, enabling opportunities to share experiences and feelings. Technologies, such as Blackboard have been successfully employed by the University of Newcastle to link students together in a virtual sense, where they can engage in safe, comfortable discussions whilst they develop the social confidence to pursue friendships in the face to face setting of the real world.

Although studies have indicated that the use of technological applications have the potential to decrease students' feelings of social isolation and loneliness, consideration must also be given to managing and monitoring the application so that it is not miss-used. It is also important to provide face-to-face opportunities for students to network and socialise. Furthermore it is important to accompany technological strategies with emotional and psychological support along with opportunities for the wider community to develop awareness of international students.

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