



# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING LONELINESS AND HOMESICKNESS

Bachelorproject Human Geography and Spatial Planning

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## **ABSTRACT**

Studying abroad can be a challenging experience. Very often, international students' well-being is being put to the test. Loneliness and homesickness are problems that most international students must cope with at some point during their stay abroad. This thesis examines how international students use social activities to prevent or diminish these feelings of loneliness and homesickness.

This study explores if students rather participate in social activities that are organized independently, or activities that are organized with help from a third party (like an international student organization or the university). Besides, if the social contacts with whom the activities occur, are mainly from the same nationality or a different one as theirs. The central question of this research is: "Which strategies do international students in Groningen use to prevent loneliness or homesickness?" The research was conducted in Groningen. Quantitative methods have been used, around 100 surveys were filled in by international students.

Findings show that two thirds of the international students have experienced loneliness, and that around one-third has experienced homesickness. For both loneliness and homesickness, independently organized social activities are mostly used, followed by social activities organized with help from a third party. Social activities are significantly more often used to prevent loneliness than to prevent homesickness. Surprisingly, only 7% of the international students used cultural activities that relate to the home country to prevent homesickness. Furthermore, can be learned from the results that the type of relations across international students is predominantly cross-cultural, and that there is no relation between the nationalities of the social contacts of international students and the type of activity in which they participate.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

For cities and universities, it is becoming progressively important to attract international talent in order to sustain their modern knowledge economies (Huberts, 2017). The number of international students in The Netherlands has strongly increased over the past ten years, the amount doubled between 2006 and 2016 (Huberts, 2017). The same pattern can be observed when looking specifically to the city of Groningen. The number of international students at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (RUG) increased from 2.750 in 2011 to 4.980 in 2016 (DvhN, 2017). This rise in numbers of international students is a result of a higher GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita, an increasing capacity of higher education institutions, more competition (on a global scale) between universities, and moreover, the growth of funding by national governments and the European Union (Rivza & Teichler, 2007; World Education Services, 2007).

Studying abroad can be a challenging experience. Very often, international students' well-being is being put to the test (Wiles, 2017). Entering an unfamiliar physical and social surrounding may lead to feelings of displacement and disorientation (Hellstèn, 2002). The more international students, with increasingly diversifying nationalities, arrive in a region with increasingly diversifying nationalities, the harder it gets for universities and international student organizations like ESN (Erasmus Student Network) to monitor their well-being, because students with different cultural backgrounds may not ask for the same needs in order to keep up their well-being. According to Tseng & Newton (2002), two critical adjustment problems of international students are: socio-cultural factors, which include difficulties in having intercultural contacts/social activities, and personal psychological problems, which contains loneliness and homesickness (Tseng & Newton, 2002). A study in Australia found that two-thirds of the international students had experienced the feeling of loneliness or isolation, especially in the first months (Sawir, et al., 2007). It can be interesting for the organizations like ESN or the universities to develop a better understanding of which strategies international students use to prevent loneliness and homesickness to keep up their well-being. This may be interesting for these organizations because it can help them provide the appropriate or missing activities that international students desire.

## 1.2 Research problem

Therefore, I investigated which strategies international students in Groningen use to prevent loneliness or homesickness. The focus herein lays on which social activities are used and with whom these activities are being practiced. Three overlapping categories of coping strategies for students are identified by Sawir et al. (2007): (1) strategies in which the students self-manage the problem by working on him- or herself; (2) strategies in which students try to enlarge social relationships or the capacity to engage in them; (3) strategies in which help is sought, often from a third party. The research is based on these last two categories. The first category about working on him- or herself is left out because this research focuses on how international students work on their well-being by actively participating in social activities. The focus is laid on social activities as

a strategy because participating in those is seen as a crucial factor in international students' well-being (Scannell & Gifford, 2014).

Based on these strategies of Sawir et al. (2007), the types of activities that could be used to prevent loneliness or homesickness are divided into three categories.

The first type of activity that international students may use to prevent loneliness or isolation is to participate in activities that are organized with help of a third party Sawir et al. (2007). An example of a third party for organizing activities is an international student organization. ESN is the main example of a student organization that facilitates the social and personal integration of international students, the office in Groningen organizes over 150 social, cultural, travel and integration events throughout the year (ESN Groningen, 2018). This can be an important strategy because these organizations actively recruit international students to participate in their activities (ESN Groningen, 2018). From a case study in Australia can be learnt that the most used strategy to prevent loneliness is to turn to friends in the host country (54%), however it is unknown what the source of these contacts are, in other words, where people have met each other (Sawir et al., 2007).

The second type of activity international students can use to prevent loneliness or homesickness is by independently and actively looking for social contacts or activities themselves, for example by introducing oneself to neighbors, or by joining a sports club. This category differs from the previous one because, in this one, students will approach new people themselves, instead of being assisted by a third party to meet new people, hence it falls under the second category of Sawir et al. (2007).

Since homesickness is a desire for familiar settings and environments, a third category is added: doing social activities with people from the same country or culture of origin' (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). This strategy might be more related to preventing homesickness because it is probably not only done with people from the same cultural background, the activities may also remind one of their home (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

### **1.3 Research aim**

The aim of the research is to find out which strategies (social activities) to prevent loneliness and homesickness are mostly used and therefore the most important for international students. Furthermore, the aim is to explore if the practiced social activities occur together with mainly cross-national students or co-national students, and if this differs per strategy. What also will be researched in this thesis is which social activities are specifically used to prevent loneliness, homesickness, or both.

This leads to the central question that will be answered through this research:

*“Which strategies do international students in Groningen use to prevent loneliness or homesickness?”*

With the following sub-questions:

- *“Which social activities are mostly used as a coping strategy for loneliness and homesickness by international students in Groningen?”*
- *“What strategies to prevent loneliness are used for what types nationality connections?”*
- *“What social activities are used in relation to what type of well-being?”*

#### **1.4 Study area: Groningen**

The city of Groningen counts around 200.000 inhabitants, of which 50.000 are higher education students (Toerisme Groningen, 2018). The University of Groningen is ranked in the top 100 of multiple world ranking lists, making it an attractive option for foreign students (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2018). There are around 6300 international students registered on the University of Groningen (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2018)

There has not been a case study on Groningen yet. Although the importance of having social contacts and participating in social activities has been widely studied, it is not clear yet how internationals put this into practice (Ying, 2002; Scannell & Gifford, 2014), making this research academically relevant. This knowledge can be valuable to institutions like the RUG, ESN, or the municipality of Groningen to create a more suitable program for international students to help them preventing loneliness, isolation or homesickness, especially since the number of international students has risen over the last years (DvhN, 2017). Furthermore, the results of this study could also be helpful for other universities and cities.

#### **1.5 Structure**

This thesis is structured into five parts. First, the introduction is given, which contains the background, the research problem and -questions. Second, a theoretical framework is given with the main theories and concepts about loneliness and homesickness, and ways to cope with them as an international student, which underpins the analysis of this research. After that follows the methodology, where it is clarified how and why the primary data is collected by means of surveys. Thereafter, the results are (statistically) analyzed and discussed through the literature, which eventually forms the conclusion with recommendations for further research.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Most of the literature on studying abroad focuses on the academic side of the experience (Wiles, 2017; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Less literature, however, is available that specifies on the personal and social circumstances that students have to deal with during their cross-border experience. However, these circumstances are just as important as they can limit the potential academic learning profits (OECD, 2004). At the same time unsatisfactory experiences in the host country are passed along to the home front and so the reputation of that country and its institutions can suffer from foreign reputation damages (OECD, 2004).

Furthermore, the main part of the literature is focused on with whom international students form social contacts to prevent loneliness (Bochner et al. 1977; Ying 2002). However, what has not been researched that extensively, is in what kind of social activities these students participate and where they find new contacts (Sawir et al., 2007; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003). From different studies can be learned that loneliness and homesickness are problems for the majority of the students, but not if there is a difference in strategies for the prevention of those problems (Sawir et al., 2007). While loneliness is an absence of necessary relationships, homesickness (or cultural loneliness) is an absence of the preferred cultural/linguistic environment (Weis, 1973; Sawir et al., 2007). These two distinctive types of loneliness might require different types of strategies to prevent or cope with them.

### **2.1 Loneliness and homesickness**

As stated before, loneliness or isolation is a problem that the majority of the students is suffering from at some point during their stay abroad (Sawir et al., 2007). In the same article is claimed that international students who just arrive in a new country find themselves in “relational deficit” or social isolation, just when they need more than the usual support (Sawir et al., 2007). As internationals are foreigners who stay for a longer period than tourists, they do not fit to the inside nor the outside of the local community (Sawir et al., 2007). As a result, they can face an unpleasant lack of social relationships (De Jong-Gierveld, 1987). Experiencing loneliness as an international student does not only affect their well-being, it also negatively influences their academic achievements (Demir & Tarhan, 2001), making the results of this research also interesting for universities. According to Weiss (1973), the main remedy for loneliness is integration into newly formed or existing social networks, which provide a base for social activities.

Loneliness of international student diverges from standard loneliness because it is also affected by cultural factors (Sawir et al., 2007). The own linguistic and cultural background is missed by many international students, which can contribute to the feeling of homesickness (Lee et al., 2006). Poyrazli & Lopez (2007) define homesickness as a desire and longing for familiar settings and environments, which can even include depressive symptoms. Homesickness is a feeling that seems to affect international students more profoundly than first-year college students (Zheng & Berry, 1991). A study of Rajapaksa & Dundes (2003) has found that 30% of international college students have problems with feeling homesick. The problems with homesickness are not only experienced when the international students first arrive but can last over the entire period abroad (Pruitt, 1978). Other studies have found that the main cause of homesickness is the loss of a

social support network and that students who succeed to regain a new social support network feel less homesick (Van Tilburg et al., 1997). Participating in social activities can therefore be a crucial factor for international students regarding keeping up their well-being.

### **2.3 Social activities as a coping strategy**

It has been widely researched which strategies are used in coping with loneliness and homesickness, and how this varies among individuals and cultural groups (Sawir et al., 2007; Ying, 2002).

Friendship formation has been found to be one of the most important factors of contentment, satisfaction, social support, and success for international students studying in foreign universities (Ying, 2002). New students who fail to feel attached to their new setting and who do not find social connections with students in the new community have not only a higher chance to experience loneliness but also homesickness (Scannell & Gifford, 2014). Participating in social activities can therefore be seen as a crucial factor of international students' well-being. According to Sawir et al. (2007), these activities and contacts can be either gathered by individually looking for new contacts or by seeking help from a third party (like ESN). Another example of a third party that helps to find social contacts are the educational institutions, where international students can meet new people and conduct social activities with them (Sawir et al., 2007). This includes social activities that occur outside of the academic program but can also contain activities as going to the library with fellow students. Strategies that include in the category self-managing are strategies where international students prevent loneliness or homesickness by independently and actively looking for social contacts or activities themselves, by joining a sports club for example (Sawir et al., 2007). Another coping strategy is doing activities that originate from their home culture, which might be more related to preventing homesickness, is to do social activities that relate to the country or culture of origin, for example joint religious activities (Sawir et al., 2007).

These different categories of sources of activities can be done with either mainly people with the same nationality or a different one. According to Bochner et al. (1977), co-national and cross-national relations have different functions for the international student. The function of co-national contacts is to express and sustain the culture of origin, while the function of cross-cultural contacts is mainly recreational. According to Bochner et al. (1977), the majority of the friendship networks of international students are co-national. Having co-national networks during the study abroad has several advantages. First, these connections give students the opportunity to mirror and discuss the freshly gained cultural experiences with other students who are in the same situation and might share the same emotions (Woolf, 2007). Second, co-national networks can serve as something familiar in a new unknown environment, which can attenuate the stress that international students frequently experience when crossing cultures (Kim, 2001). Third, strong friendships with co-nationals offer emotional support and give a sense of cultural identity (Maudeni, 2001). And Fourth, co-national friendships may increase the overall level of self-esteem of internationals (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998).

On the other hand, multiple reasons for international students to form cross-national friendships are identified. First, it gives students the opportunity to not only learn about the host country, but also about other cultures (Hendrickson et al, 2010). Second, having contacts that are in a new environment as well, gives a certain sense of commonality which can be experienced as

enjoyable (Hendrickson, 2011). And third, however this advantage only refers to English speaking countries, many international students feel insecure or embarrassed about their accent, speaking with other internationals who are also in their learning process, can be less intimidating while the language skills are still improving (Yeh & Inose, 2013).

## 2.4 Conceptual model

The variables ‘type of social activity’ which is based on the theory of coping with loneliness from Sawir et al., (2007), and ‘the type of relation (cross-national or co-national) make up the form of the strategies for international students to prevent loneliness, homesickness or both.

The conceptual model in figure 1 schematically shows how the strategies are built up and how they relate to different kinds of well-being.

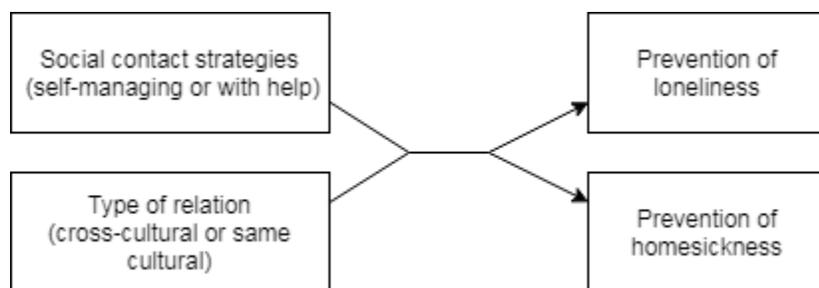


Figure 1: Conceptual model

It is expected that, similar to the case study in Australia, more than half of the international students have experienced loneliness at some point during their stay abroad (Sawir et al., 2007). Furthermore, the percentage of international students that frequently feel homesick in Groningen is expected to be around 30%, similar as results from earlier research (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003). Research has found that international students often have more friends from their home country, therefore it is expected that doing social activities with people from the same country or culture of origin is the most important strategy of preventing loneliness and homesickness (Woolf, 2007). In addition, it is expected that most of these activities will be done with people with the same cultural background and that this is mainly done to prevent homesickness, because it might remind one to the home country. The other two types of social activities: independently organized activities and activities with help from a third party, are expected to be used more to prevent loneliness, since they are based on the loneliness coping strategies of Sawir et al. (2007).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Data collection**

To examine which strategies international students in Groningen use to prevent loneliness or homesickness, primary data has been collected by means of surveys. This makes it possible to obtain generalized information about behaviors, characteristics and attitudes of a population (McLafferty, 2010). Quantitative methods are most suitable for this research because it allows to get a general overview of the strategies and to examine the relationship between different variables, of which more will be said later. With this general view of international students' strategies in Groningen, can thereafter be projected on the same population in different countries.

The survey contains questions about students' experiences with loneliness and homesickness, social activities they have participated in, if their social contacts are mainly from the same or a different nationality, and some general information, such as age, nationality and sex.

The data collection started with handing out surveys in front or inside international student accommodations, which are mainly located on the 'Zonnelaan' near the Zernike Campus. The reason for surveying near students' accommodation is because they can be considered as 'neutral' places. Handing out surveys where a high number of students that participate in certain activities are expected (like the ESN office), are avoided to prevent distortion. The surveys are conducted face-to-face, and the respondents are selected using the random sample method. Advantages of surveying face-to-face are that the respondent can ask for clarity when a question is unclear, and that it is easier to check if the respondent is part of the target group, making the data more valuable and accurate (McLafferty, 2010). The survey has also been spread on social media (Facebook), to get more responses.

Since most of the literature is about international students, the desired sample population only contains international students, so internationals who stay in Groningen for an internship or a job are excluded from the research.

#### **3.2 Data overview**

A total of 101 people filled in the survey, of which 71 have filled it in completely. 62,5% of the sample population is a female, 34,4% is a male. The average age is 22,1 years (reaching from 18 to 38), and the average period international students are staying in Groningen is around one and a half year (reaching from two months to six years). The map in figure x shows the nationalities of the respondents. The dataset contains students from all around the world, mostly from Germany and The United Kingdom. The data is analyzed by means of statistical testing with the program SPSS, more details on this are given in the results chapter.

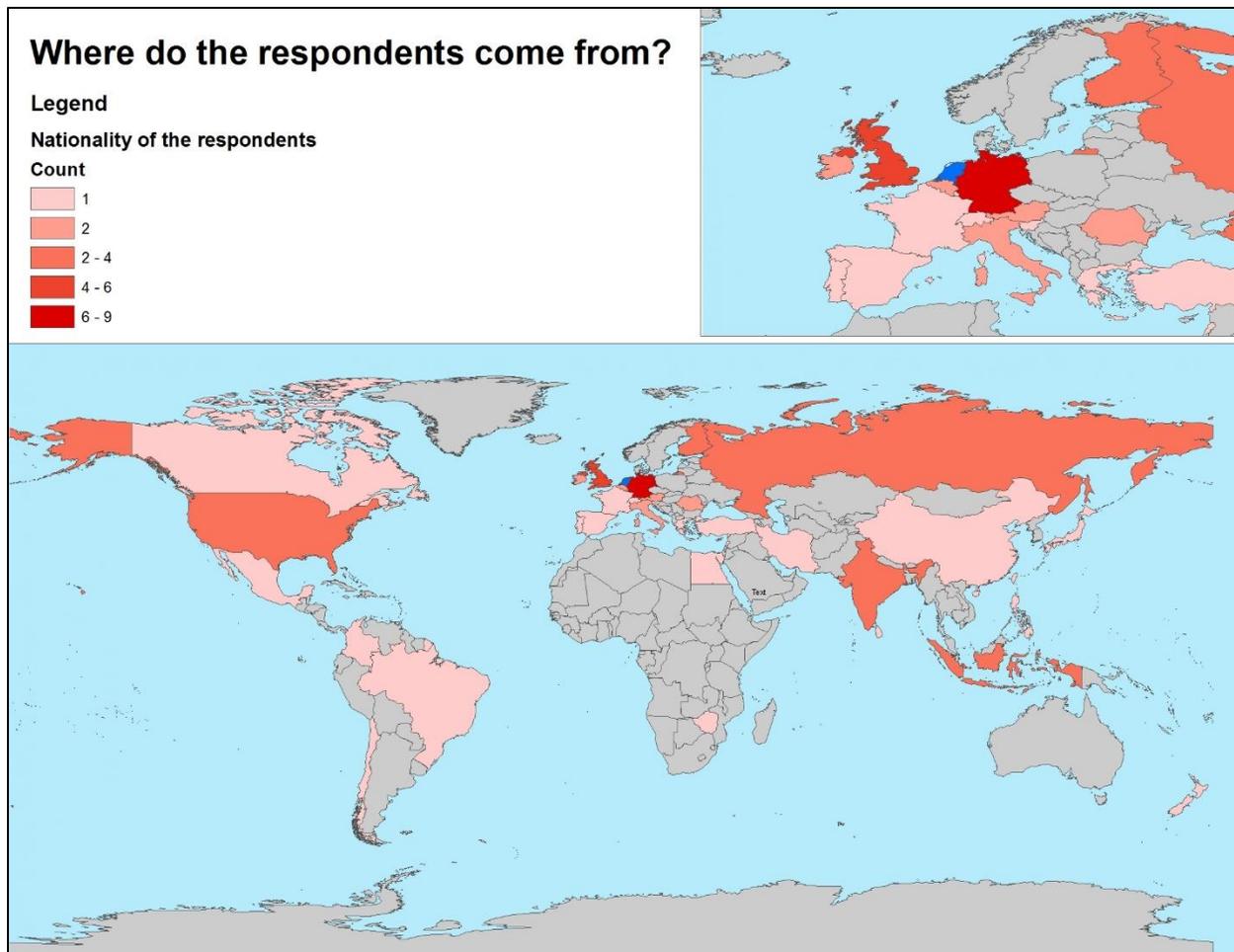


Figure 2: Nationalities of the respondents

### 3.3 Reflection

The face-to-face collection of data took more time than expected since there were not many students entering and leaving the student accommodation building. Therefore, it was decided to spread the survey on social media (Facebook). This gave around 20 responses; however, the quality of this data is considered to be poor since a large number of people did not fully complete the survey. To get more responses, the link to the survey has been sent to international students, by messaging them directly on social media which resulted in a greater quantity and quality of data. A side note that has to be made here however, is that consequently the respondents were not completely anonymous anymore, because the names were shown to the researcher when the students were messaged directly. This fact has been pointed out to the students, and that their names or other personal information would not be linked to their answers.

Nevertheless, it is expected that the quality of the data that has been collected through the internet, has a higher quality standard than the data that is collected through face-to-face surveying. The reason for this is that with face-to-face surveying, groups of students were asked to fill in the survey. Sometimes this led to discussions within the group members, which may have an influence on the results (McLafferty, 2010). It is also possible that under social pressure, respondents gave socially desirable answers (for example with questions about experiences with

loneliness and homesickness). Since filling in surveys online can be done at any desirable time, the chance of doing this alone is much bigger, which improves the quality of the data.

Another reflective consideration that needs to be addressed, is that not all the gathered data is used in this research. For example, in the survey, the respondent is asked to select in which specific activities he or she has participated in, but in order to make the data operable for statistical testing, it has been categorized. This transformation made the data less detailed but was required with the intention of drawing statistical conclusions about the population.

### **3.4 Ethics**

“Researchers have an explicit and fundamental responsibility towards the researched. The dignity and well-being of respondents, both mentally and physically, is absolutely crucial” (O’Leary, 2010). To fulfill this responsibility and dignity towards the respondents, the respondents were informed about the subject and the goal of the research prior to the survey. It is also explicitly stated that the identity of the participant remains completely anonymous and that the information obtained is treated with confidentiality. In addition, it has been made clear that the respondent could decide to stop the survey at any time.

An ethical consideration that needs to be addressed in this research is that respondents were asked for very personal information (social life, friends, loneliness, homesickness). This might be information of that respondents are not typically that open about. As a Dutch student, the international students might consider me as an outsider, although it might help to say that I have been an international student myself, so respondents find it easier to share their experiences. To make the respondents feel more comfortable about sharing privacy-sensitive information, the respondents’ identity remains anonymous.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Social activities as a coping strategy

In the survey, international students were asked which social activities they have participated in, and which of these activities they have used specifically to prevent loneliness or homesickness. The results of the survey (see figure 3) show that loneliness is a problem that is experienced more frequently than homesickness. 58,1% of the international students experience loneliness sometimes, often, or always, while 39,3% experiences homesickness with the same frequency. Only around 10% have never suffered from homesickness or loneliness.

When the loneliness percentages are compared to earlier studies, similar results can be found. From the Australian case study, it can be learned that 65% of the students have experienced moments of loneliness or isolation, while in Groningen this percentage counts up to 58% (students who feel lonely sometimes, often, or always) (Sawir et al., 2007). Therefore, it can be concluded that loneliness for international students in Groningen is an existing problem since the majority of the population is dealing with this.

Even if the percentage of international students which experience homesickness on a regular basis is lower than the percentage of students that experiences loneliness, it still counts up to 39%, making it a problem that needs to be taken into account as well. This percentage aligns with earlier research, in which is stated that 30% of international college students have problems with homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003).

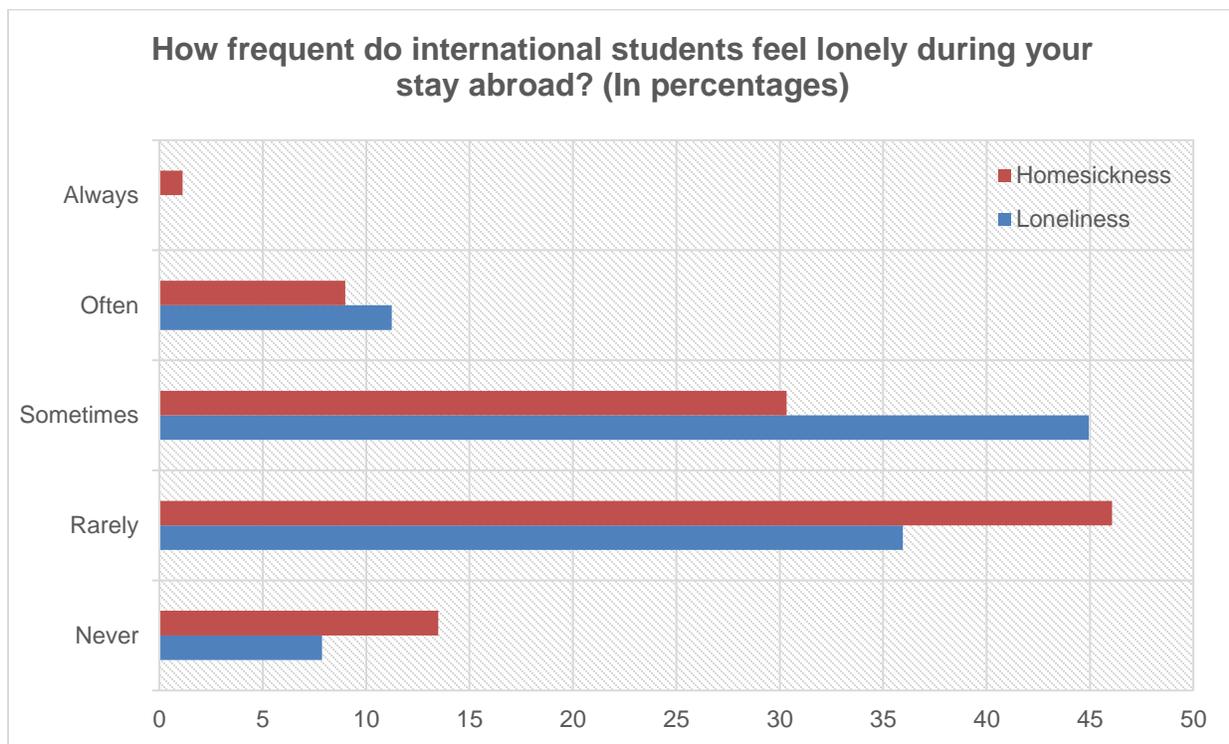


Figure 3: Frequency of experiencing loneliness or homesickness

Now that the numbers of students with feelings of loneliness and homesickness are determined, the strategies to prevent or diminish these feelings by participating in social activities can be examined. This can be done by either independently looking for new contacts, finding contacts with the help of a third party (like ESN, the university, a sports club), or participating in social activities that relate to the home country (Sawir et al., 2007). When analyzing the dataset, it turns out that 85,9% of the international students participate in activities with help from a third party (see figure 4). 82% participated in activities that were independently organized, meaning that there is no third party involved in organizing these gatherings (for example organize a dinner with neighbors). 8,5% has done an activity that is related to the home country.

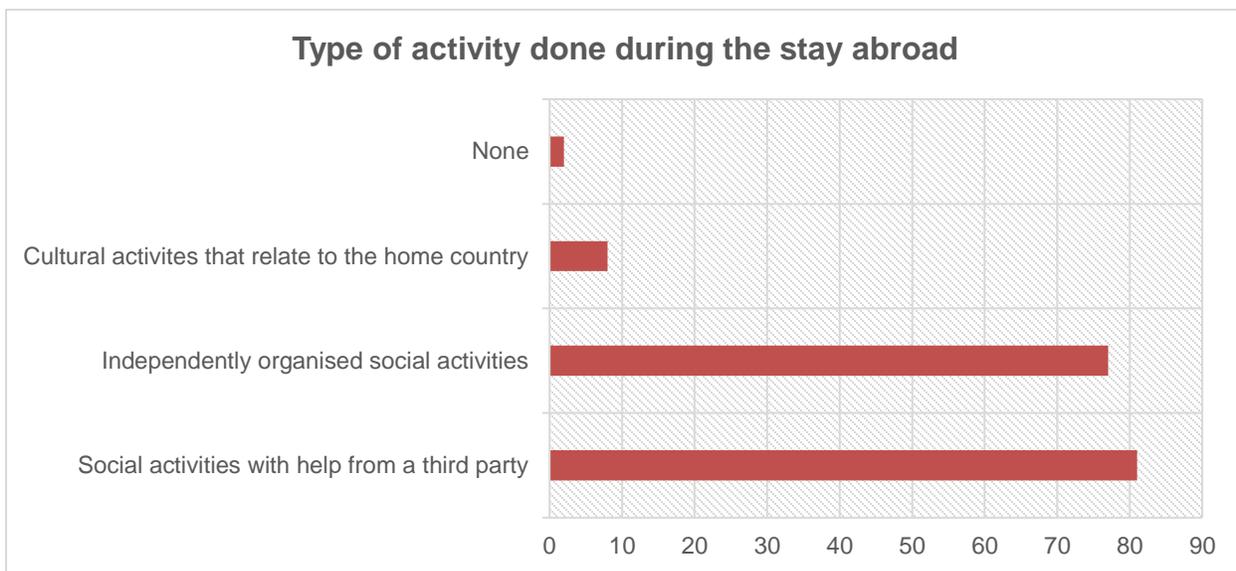


Figure 4: In what type of activity do international students participate in?

Knowing that activities which are organized independently and activities which are set up with help from a third party are both done to a large extent by international students, it can be interesting to look at which strategies are used to specifically prevent loneliness or homesickness. From the dataset, it is evident that social activities are more used to prevent or diminish loneliness than for homesickness (see figure 5). Only 5,7% of the international students did not use social activities to prevent loneliness, whereas this number counts up to 28,8% for homesickness. This difference is explainable, as conducting social activities is an often-mentioned remedy for loneliness (Weiss, 1973), but less for homesickness. Still, the other two-third of the international students did in fact select social activities as a strategy to prevent homesickness. It was expected that participating in cultural activities that relate to the home country would be a strategy that is widely supported by the students (Lee et al., 2006). But in fact, only 6,9% of the students used this strategy to prevent or diminish homesickness. The number of students who used this as a strategy does not come near the most used strategy to prevent homesickness, which is participating in independently organized social activities (51,1%), shortly followed by participating in social activities with help from a third party (37,5%). The same image is visible when looking at the most used strategies to prevent or diminish loneliness, which is also independently organized activities but with a significantly higher percentage (81,8%), followed by activities with help from

a third party (70,5%). Linking these numbers to the literature, we can conclude that indeed participating in social activities can be seen as a crucial factor of international students' well-being (Ying, 2002; Scannell & Gifford, 2014).

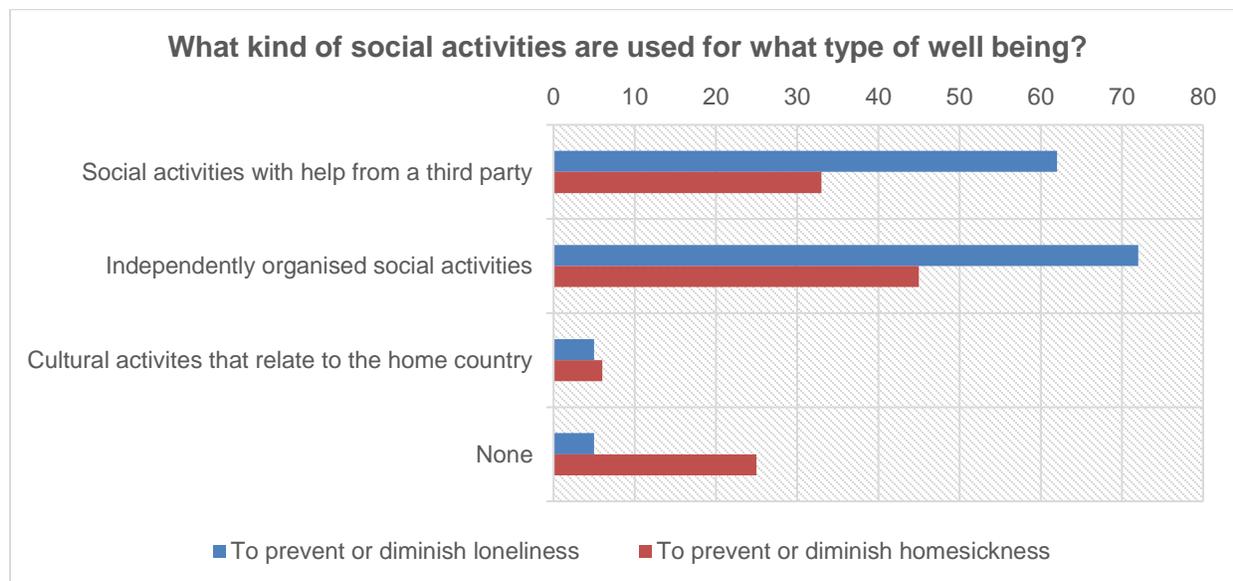


Figure 5: Activities used specifically for a type of well-being

#### 4.2 Social activities occur mainly cross-national

Now it is known that international students use social activities to prevent mostly loneliness and homesickness, it can be examined with whom these activities occur, since these two elements form the strategy of an international student (see conceptual model). The respondents were asked if they, in general, participated in social activities with mainly people from the same nationality as theirs, or a different one, which could be answered with a scale bar from 1 to 7. According to Bochner et al. (1977), the majority of the friendship networks consist of people from their own country, because these connections give students the opportunity to mirror and discuss the new cultural experiences with other students who are in the same situation and might share the same emotions (Woolf, 2007). It is also said that the level of empathy and affection for cross-national relations lays lower than co-national relations (Lee et al., 2006). However, when calculating the average number that students gave on the scale concerning the nationalities of their social contacts, it results in an average of 5,5. (1 = social contacts are mainly from the same nationality, 7 = social contacts are mainly from a different nationality). The modus of the score given by students is a score of 7 (selected 25 times of 64). Contradicting the literature, the results show that the majority of the international students participate mainly in social activities with peers from a different nationality. As said before, multiple reasons for international students to form friendships with cross-national students are identified: it gives students the opportunity to learn about other cultures; it gives a sense of commonality; and students might feel more comfortable speaking with other internationals (Hendrickson et al, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2013). These advantages could be the reason why most international students in Groningen participate in social activities with mainly other nationalities than their own.

To see whether there is a relation between the type of activity and the type of social connection (co-national or cross-national), a Mann-Whitney U test is used. Since the data is not normally distributed, the independent sample T-test was not an option, therefore this non-parametric statistic test is selected. First, it is tested whether there is a relation between participating in social activities that are being set in place with help from a third party and the type (nationalities) of the social connections. When running the Mann-Whitney test, a significance level of 0.822 is given (see appendix 1), meaning that there is no significant relation between participating in this type of activity as an international student and the nationalities of the social contacts of these students. There neither has been found a relation for the other types of activities: independently organized social activities (sig. level: 0.671), and cultural activities that relate to the country (sig. level: 0.406). Therefore, it can be concluded that the nationalities of the social contacts of international students do not influence the type of activity in which the students participate, or vice versa. This means that even if both the social activity and type of relation form the coping strategies of the students, it does not influence each other. An international student with lots of co-national contacts generally participates in the same type of activity.

#### **4.3 Significant difference in strategies for loneliness and homesickness**

In the survey, international students were asked which social activity is specifically used to prevent loneliness or homesickness. As said earlier, organizing social activities independently is the most used strategy for preventing both homesickness and loneliness, shortly followed by activities that are organized with the help of a third party.

Now it is known which social activity is most used to prevent loneliness and homesickness, it can be tested whether there is a significant difference between the type of activity that is being used to prevent loneliness and the type of activity that is being used to prevent homesickness. In order to find out, multiple Chi-Square tests are used. The Chi-Square can be used to test the independence of two nominal or ordinal variables, or for the comparison between groups. The null hypothesis, in this case, is that there is no difference between participating in a social activity to prevent loneliness and participating in a social activity to prevent homesickness. First, the social activities that are organized with help from a third party are analyzed. From earlier results could be learned that more international students use this kind of strategy for the prevention of loneliness than for the prevention of homesickness. When this difference is being statistically tested, a level of significance of 0.002 is found (see appendix 1), meaning that there is a significant difference between the two variables ( $P < 0.05$ ). The same significant difference applies for independently organized activities (sig. level:  $< 0.001$ ), and for people who did not use a social activity to prevent loneliness or homesickness (sig. level: 0.001).

Therefore, it can be concluded that overall, the use of social activities is significantly higher for the prevention of loneliness than for the prevention of homesickness. This means that participating in social activities is mainly a remedy for loneliness, and less for homesickness. The theory of coping strategies for loneliness from Sawir et al. (2007) is therefore confirmed. Indeed, social activities can also be considered as a coping strategy for homesickness, however this strategy has not been used with the same significance as for loneliness. Still, theories claiming that participating in social activities also works as a remedy for homesickness should not be neglected, since 75% of the respondents did in fact use these as a strategy to prevent homesickness (Ying, 2002; Scannell & Gifford, 2014).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, surveys have been used to investigate which strategies students use in their struggle against loneliness and homesickness.

From analyzing the results of the collected data, it can be learned that two-thirds of the international students in Groningen experience loneliness sometimes, often, or always, while more than one-third experiences homesickness with the same frequency. These percentages do not differ significantly from what is known from the literature. The results of this research therefore confirm that loneliness and homesickness are problems where a large share of international students are dealing with (Sawir et al., 2007; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003).

When analyzing how international students in Groningen use social activities to keep up their well-being, it can be found that for both loneliness and homesickness, independently organized social activities are mostly used, followed by social activities organized with help from a third party. Since nearly all international students use social activities as a prevention tool for loneliness and homesickness, the coping theory of Sawir et al. (2007) can be confirmed: both independently organized activities and activities that are organized with help from a third party are crucial strategies for international students to keep up their well-being.

A surprising result is that only 7% of the international students used cultural activities that relate to the home country to prevent homesickness. This contradicts earlier studies, which state that participating in cultural activities that relate to the home country would be a strategy that is widely supported by the students (Lee et al., 2006). A reason behind this low number in Groningen has not been found and requires further research.

Any type of social activity is used more often to prevent or diminish loneliness than to prevent or diminish homesickness. From the statistical tests can be concluded that overall the use of social activities is significantly higher for the prevention of loneliness than for the prevention of homesickness. This means that participating in social activities is mainly a remedy for loneliness, and less for homesickness.

From the results can be learned that the type of relations across international students is predominantly cross-cultural. This does not align with the theory of Bochner et al. (1977), which states that the majority of the friendship networks consist of people from their own country. This result confirms the advantages of having cross-national relations: it offers the opportunity to learn more about other cultures and the English language and it gives a sense of community among the international students (Hendrickson et al, 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2013). There has not been found a relation between the nationalities of the social contacts of international students and the type of activity in which they participate. This means that even if both the social activity and type of relation form the coping strategies of the students, it does not influence each other. Consequently, an international student with lots of co-national contacts generally participates in the same type of activity.

Coming back to the central question: international students mainly use independently organized social activities and activities that are organized with help from a third party mainly as a strategy

to prevent loneliness, but also for homesickness. These social activities mainly occur with cross-national contacts.

These findings have implications in the areas of universities, international student offices, and city governments or municipalities. Since the quantitative data were collected directly from international students, the study is helpful for these organisations to have a better understanding about the concerns and needs of international students. This thesis provides a basis picture of international students' strategies for well-being, however further research is needed to generate a more detailed and complete picture of this. Further investigation in this topic could create a useful reference for universities or student organizations to create appropriate programs which can promote the well-being of international students.

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## APPENDIX 1: Output tables SPSS

### Mann Whitney 1

<b>Ranks</b>				
	Participated in social activities with help from third parties	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
In general, do you participate in socialactivities mainly with people from the same nationality as yours or a different one?	No	7	31,07	217,50
	Yes	57	32,68	1862,50
	Total	64		

<b>Test Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	
	In general, do you participate in socialactivities mainly with people from the same nationality as yours or a different one?
Mann-Whitney U	189,500
Wilcoxon W	217,500
Z	-,225
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,822
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	,833 <sup>b</sup>
a. Grouping Variable: Participated in social activities with help from third parties	
b. Not corrected for ties.	

## Mann Whitney 2

<b>Test Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	
	In general, do you participate in socialactivities mainly with people from the same nationality as yours or a different one?
Mann-Whitney U	204,000
Wilcoxon W	240,000
Z	-,424
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,671
a. Grouping Variable: In which social activities (activities with others) do you participate during your stay abroad?___Independently organised social activities (for example going out, eating or traveling with a group)	

## Mann Whitney 3

<b>Test Statistics<sup>a</sup></b>	
	In general, do you participate in socialactivities mainly with people from the same nationality as yours or a different one?
Mann-Whitney U	139,500
Wilcoxon W	160,500
Z	-,830
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,406
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	,436 <sup>b</sup>
a. Grouping Variable: In which social activities (activities with others) do you participate during your stay abroad?___Specific cultural activities that relate to your home country	
b. Not corrected for ties.	

## Chi-Square 1

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9,168 <sup>a</sup>	1	,002		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	7,746	1	,005		
Likelihood Ratio	9,951	1	,002		
Fisher's Exact Test				,003	,002
Linear-by-Linear Association	9,055	1	,003		
N of Valid Cases	81				
a. 0 cells (0,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10,19.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

## Chi-Square 2

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16,066 <sup>a</sup>	1	,000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	13,783	1	,000		
Likelihood Ratio	17,895	1	,000		
Fisher's Exact Test				,000	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	15,868	1	,000		
N of Valid Cases	81				
a. 0 cells (0,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6,22.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

### Chi-Square 3

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	40,943 <sup>a</sup>	1	,000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	30,440	1	,000		
Likelihood Ratio	19,275	1	,000		
Fisher's Exact Test				,000	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	40,438	1	,000		
N of Valid Cases	81				
a. 2 cells (50,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,37.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

### Chi-Square 4

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11,937 <sup>a</sup>	1	,001		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	8,733	1	,003		
Likelihood Ratio	12,515	1	,000		
Fisher's Exact Test				,002	,002
Linear-by-Linear Association	11,789	1	,001		
N of Valid Cases	81				
a. 2 cells (50,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,54.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

## APPENDIX 2: Survey

### International students' strategies to prevent loneliness and homesickness

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#### International students' strategies to prevent loneliness and homesickness

Experiencing loneliness or homesickness can be an issue you might have to cope with as an international student. For my Bachelor Thesis (Human Geography and Spatial Planning), I am conducting a research about which strategies international students use to prevent the feeling of being alone or homesick. If you are an international student in Groningen, you could help me with my research by filling in this survey which will take only 4-5 minutes. Be assured that all the answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentiality, and that your identity will remain anonymous. I would really appreciate your help. Thank you in advance!

Dick Vogel - (d.vogel8@hotmail.com)

How frequent do you feel lonely during your stay abroad?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

How frequent do you feel homesick during your stay abroad?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

In which social activities (activities with others) do you participate during your stay abroad?

- Activities organised by ESN or other international student organisations
- Activities organised by another organisation, namely: \_\_\_\_\_
- Study related social activities (for example studying together)
- Independently organised social activities (for example going out, eating or traveling with a group)
- Religion related activities
- Sport related social activities
- Specific cultural activities that relate to your home country
- Other:

Which of the chosen activities do/did you use to prevent or diminish the feeling of loneliness?

- None
- Activities organised by ESN or other international student organisations
- Activities organised by another organisation, namely: \_\_\_\_\_
- Study related social activities (for example studying together)
- Independently organised social activities (for example going out, eating or traveling with a group)
- Religion related activities
- Sport related social activities
- Specific cultural activities that relate to your home country
- Other:

Which of the chosen activities do/did you use to prevent or diminish the feeling of Homesickness?

- None
- Activities organised by ESN or other international student organisations
- Activities organised by another organisation, namely: \_\_\_\_\_
- Study related social activities (for example studying together)
- Independently organised social activities (for example going out, eating or traveling with a group)
- Religion related activities
- Sport related social activities
- Specific cultural activities that relate to your home country
- Other:

Did you, during your stay abroad, do social activities that were related to your cultural background from your home country to prevent or diminish homesickness?

- No
- Yes, namely:

Did you, during your stay abroad, look specifically for people from the same cultural background to prevent or diminish the feeling of homesickness?

- No
- Yes

Which activities did you use to find new friends during your stay abroad?

- None
- Activities organised by ESN or other international student organisations
- Activities organised by another organisation, namely: \_\_\_\_\_
- Independently organised social activities (for example going out, eating or traveling with a group)
- Religion related activities
- Joining a sportsclub
- Participating in an introduction/pre-semester program
- Specific cultural activities that relate to your home country
- Other:

Where in Groningen do you participate in social activities the most? And why there? Please give a street or a specific location

In general, do you participate in social activities mainly with people from the same nationality as yours or a different one?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6

0 = mainly from the same nationality as mine, 3 = equally mixed, 6 = mainly from a different nationality as mine

What are the nationalities of your three closest contacts you have met abroad?

	Nationality
1	<input type="text"/>
2	<input type="text"/>
3	<input type="text"/>

What is your nationality?

What is your sex?

- Female  
 Male  
 Other

What is your age?

For how many months will you be in Groningen in total?