

Addressing Social Isolation in Student Life: A Service Design Proposal for a Cross-Institutional Student Hub in Hamburg

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Abstract

Rising levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness among students are increasingly linked to social isolation and limited opportunities for meaningful interaction. This study explores how gaps in student social infrastructure impact wellbeing and examines the potential of service design as a preventive intervention. Drawing on literature in mental health, social design, and youth wellbeing, alongside qualitative interviews with students and a student engagement professional, the research identifies key barriers to social participation, including time constraints, cultural and language differences, and limited visibility of existing initiatives.

Findings suggest that current social opportunities are fragmented, institutionally bounded, and often fail to support sustained, low-pressure interaction. In response, the study proposes a city-wide Student Hub in Hamburg, designed to foster belonging through shared routines, activity-based engagement, and inclusive participation. The concept integrates spatial, temporal, social, and digital elements to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The research highlights the role of accessible social infrastructure in promoting preventive mental wellbeing and emphasizes participatory design as a key factor in creating inclusive student communities.

Keywords: Student Wellbeing, Social Isolation, Service Design, Social Belonging, Social Infrastructure

1.Introduction

Young adults are reporting increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness linked to social isolation (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Psychologists suggest that limited opportunities for social interaction can negatively affect mental wellbeing (Dr. Lewis, 2025), emphasising the value of community and ongoing social relationships. Building a sense of belonging can be challenging for many students, especially international students (Alshammari et al., 2023). Cultural differences, language barriers, time constraints, and the pressure to balance studies with work and study can significantly limit opportunities for social interaction. This may result in students experiencing isolation, even while being physically present in busy educational environments.

Research has shown that well-designed social environments can positively influence mental wellbeing (Henderson et al., 2023). While university-affiliated social hubs in Hamburg function effectively for their own students, access is typically restricted to each institution, creating a gap for students from other universities. As a result, some students may face reduced opportunities for informal social interaction, and repeated low-pressure social connections outside formal classroom settings. This highlights a broader need for accessible student social systems that are inclusive for all students across different institutions.

This research project explores whether Student Hub, an open, city-wide proposed service for students, can reduce isolation and support wellbeing through structured social touchpoints, shared routines, and low-pressure peer interactions.

2.Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Mental Health, Social Isolation, and Student Wellbeing

Mental health issues amongst youth have risen dramatically over the last ten years (Fonagy, 2025). The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the rise of communication through social media, have shown increased effects on isolation and lack of connection in social settings (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). However, these factors represent only part of larger systemic issues affecting young people's wellbeing (Fonagy, 2025).

The lack of socialising is believed to be the leading cause of worsening mental health (Lewis, 2025). Dr. Lewis (2025) explains that meaningful social connection is fundamental for good mental health, stating that people with greater social support tend to recover faster from mental illness and show greater resilience when facing challenges. Strong social support also stimulates brain growth, leading to improvements in cognitive performance and mental sharpness. As she notes, "Being connected to others gives your

life meaning and purpose” (Lewis, 2025). In addition, studies show that lack of social interaction can significantly increase the risk of clinically diagnosed depression and anxiety (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2022).

These findings suggest that social connection is not only beneficial, but also essential to mental wellbeing. However, existing student services often focus on academic support or crisis intervention, rather than creating accessible opportunities for low-pressure social interaction. This highlights a gap where service design interventions could support student wellbeing through preventive and relational approaches, rather than just focusing on reactive ones.

2.2 Social Isolation and the Student Experience

Research from the University of California highlights that social isolation negatively impacts the university learning experience (Lim & Vighnarajah, 2018). This suggests that students need spaces to enrich their interpersonal and communication skills, to foster a stronger sense of community with their peers. The findings also show that students are often unaware that they may be experiencing social isolation, as it can be confused with stress (Lim & Vighnarajah, 2018).

The consequences of social isolation are often more severe for international students, who may experience additional barriers such as culture shock, language difficulties, and in some cases discrimination (Alshammari et al., 2023). International students also frequently experience missing their country, family, and friends. This can further complicate their ability to fit into a new learning environment (Lim & Vighnarajah, 2018).

This suggests that social isolation among students is not always visible or self-identified, and that relying on students to actively seek support may exclude those most in need. From a service design perspective, this points to the importance of designing services that integrate social interaction into everyday routines, lowering the threshold for participation, and reducing the pressure often associated with organised socialising.

2.3 Psychological Needs and Theoretical Framing

According to psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist Peter Fonagy (Fonagy, 2025), there is an urgent need to create environments that foster the essential psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy supports young people in making independent choices, competence equips them with education and skills that enable self-efficacy, and relatedness builds a sense of belonging and community. Fonagy argues that work, volunteering, and social engagement provide key

ingredients for good mental health by offering purpose while supporting autonomy, competence, and connection (Fonagy, 2025).

This framework helps explain why social engagement initiatives can positively impact mental wellbeing. It also provides a useful lens for evaluating existing student services, particularly in terms of whether they enable students to participate actively, feel capable, and experience a sense of belonging rather than passive attendance.

A complementary perspective is offered by Bilotta (2025), who examines the role of youth hubs in promoting mental wellbeing through the integration of Self-Reg, developed by Stuart Shanker. Self-Reg conceptualises mental health not as self-control, but as the capacity to recognise, reduce, and recover from stress, across five interrelated domains: biological, emotional, cognitive, social, and prosocial. Within community-based youth hubs, this framework is implemented through sensory-friendly spaces, quiet rooms, peer interaction, reflective practices, and restorative activities such as creative workshops and mindfulness sessions. Bilotta's case demonstrates how spatial design, programming, and relational practices can actively reduce stressors while fostering belonging and resilience. This expands the understanding of youth hubs beyond service access, positioning them as environments intentionally structured to support emotional regulation and social connection.

2.4 Student Social Spaces Concepts

There are several institution-based initiatives that demonstrate how student-led social environments can foster wellbeing and belonging.

At the University of Hamburg, the student body organisation AStA University of Hamburg supports wellbeing through counselling services, student representation, and regular informal events such as game nights, reading cafés, and run clubs (AStA University of Hamburg, 2026). They offer an open, no-sign-up format that lowers barriers to participation and encourages spontaneous engagement. However, access is restricted to enrolled students, limiting opportunities to engage with students across other institutions.

Similarly, HAW Hamburg offers initiatives such as the WeBuddy programme, which pairs international and exchange students with experienced peers and organises structured social activities (HAW Hamburg, 2023). While this model effectively supports integration for international students, its reliance on formal pairing and organised events may exclude those who avoid structured programmes or hesitate to register.

A more extensive example is Samfundet in Trondheim, Norway. This is a large-scale student-run community hub offering diverse cultural and social events. The hub is operated entirely by student volunteers, and is structured around core values of inclusivity, independence, vibrancy, and enjoyment. (Studentersamfundet i Trondhjem, n.d.).

Collectively, these models demonstrate that student-led spaces can successfully cultivate belonging and engagement. However, student social environments in Hamburg remain institutionally bounded, tied to specific student identities or formal participation structures. As a result, these services have limited accessibility, reinforcing fragmentation rather than addressing it. Hamburg lacks a student service like Samfundet, that is student led and open for all institutions.

2.5 Integrated Youth Hub Models

A relevant example of youth-centred service infrastructure is Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO) (Henderson et al., 2023). The model operates as a network of accessible, walk-in community hubs that combine mental health services with informal wellbeing activities, primary care, and social support. YWHO actively supports youth by removing referral requirements, reducing stigma, and embedding youth participation into governance and design processes. Rather than treating social connection as an optional addition to care, the model implements belonging, accessibility, and peer involvement directly into the service structure itself (Henderson et al., 2023).

2.6 Social Design and the Role of Participation

Enzo Manzini (2023) argues that social design must recognise complexity and avoid assuming a single universal truth. He emphasises that citizens and organisations without formal design training play a crucial role in social innovation, as they bring lived experience and contextual knowledge into the design process.

Manzini's perspective helps interpret both the literature and the example cases discussed. Initiatives such as Samfundet demonstrate how participatory structures and shared ownership can foster sustained engagement and a sense of belonging. However, many existing services still rely on institutional boundaries or formal participation, limiting their reach.

2.7 Implications for the Research Focus

Taken together, the literature, examples, and theory highlight a gap in current student services: the lack of inclusive, city-wide social infrastructures that support repeated, low-pressure interaction across institutional boundaries. This gap forms the basis for the research focus of this project, which investigates whether a service designed around shared routines, accessibility, and peer participation can reduce feelings of isolation and support student wellbeing at scale.

3.Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences with social interaction and wellbeing. A combination of literature review, expert insight, and first-hand student interviews were used to inform and support the design of this project. This research assumes that social interaction and a sense of belonging play a significant role in student wellbeing, and that barriers to participation may prevent students from accessing existing social opportunities. Understanding these barriers through lived experiences can help inform more inclusive and accessible service design solutions.

The research began with secondary data exploring the impact of social isolation on student mental health and examples of successful student hubs. These insights helped shape interview questions focused on social engagement, belonging, barriers, and motivations. Interviews were chosen to gather user insights, because they allow deeper exploration of personal experiences of belonging, social barriers, and motivations that are difficult to capture through surveys. This approach is particularly suitable for exploratory design research, where understanding lived experiences and perceptions is essential for identifying weaknesses and opportunities for the service design.

The first interview was conducted with Sangeetha George, Student Engagement Manager at BSBI in Berlin. Sangeetha provided professional insight into student socialization challenges. Following this, three interviews were held with anonymous students from different institutions and educational backgrounds, to capture diverse lived experiences. All interviews were conversational in style, allowing flexibility while focusing on core themes. This ensured the participants could speak freely and allowed for broader data gathering. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all interviewees.

The interview material was analysed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded and grouped into recurring patterns, which were then organized through affinity mapping to identify shared themes such as isolation, belonging, time constraints, motivation, and accessibility.

This research has several limitations. The small sample size of three students and one professional interview mean that the findings cannot represent the experiences of all students in Hamburg. Additionally, the interviews capture self-reported perceptions rather than observed behaviour. However, the goal of this exploratory research was not statistical representation, but to identify meaningful insights that could inform the design direction of the proposed service concept.

4. Insights

4.1 Interview with Professional Sangeetha George

Sangeetha George is the Student Engagement Manager at BSBI in Berlin. Her main work areas are student engagement, mental health counselling, and group support. Sangeetha has met with hundreds of students that have shared their struggles with socializing. She also regularly organizes student engagement activities to help students connect, boost morale and build community.

4.1.1 The Impact of Social Interaction on Mental Wellbeing

Sangeetha's responses indicate that social interaction plays a highly significant role in student wellbeing, but it's very individualized. While some students actively seek belonging and community, others tend to isolate themselves due to differing life priorities or perceived social mismatches. This is especially the case for older post-graduate students interacting with younger peers.

This suggests that social wellbeing is not one-size-fits-all. Age, cultural background, and life stage influence how students engage socially. However, the recurring theme is that students who lack connection are more vulnerable to loneliness and mental strain. Even when students prioritize work or academic goals, social isolation may still negatively impact their mental health in subtle ways.

4.1.2 Belonging as a Fundamental Psychological Need

Sangeetha emphasizes that belonging is a "basic fundamental need." She observes noticeable improvements in students' wellbeing once they establish a sense of community. Her statement implies that belonging is not simply a "nice extra" but foundational for students' emotional stability and academic success. This observation aligns with Fonagy's (2025) framework, which highlights relatedness as a core psychological need necessary for mental wellbeing. The challenge lies in motivating students to step outside their comfort zones. This indicates that while belonging is essential, initiating social connection often requires additional support and encouragement.

4.1.3 Structural and Cultural Barriers to Socializing

The interview highlights three major barriers which suggest that lack of socialization is often not due to unwillingness, but external constraints. Many students prioritize survival (employment, visa compliance) over social needs. This reflects a hierarchy of priorities where financial security temporarily overrides belonging. Cultural intimidation further complicates integration, especially for international students unfamiliar with German culture or European academic environments. An important insight is that forming even one close connection significantly reduces social barriers.

This implies that early-stage micro-connections (one friend) can act as gateways to broader community participation.

4.1.4 Motivation Through Tangible Rewards

Sangeetha's previous experiences show that students are more likely to participate in events that offer networking, volunteering, or career opportunities. This reveals that engagement increases when social activities align with students' primary motivations; employment and professional development. This suggests that purely "social for fun" activities may have lower attendance compared to events perceived as productive or beneficial.

4.1.5 Designing a Supportive Social Hub

Sangeetha recommends that a social hub should:

- Begin as a space for socialization before introducing mental health services
- Represent diverse nationalities and cultures
- Offer structured activities (movie nights, board games, themed parties)
- Gradually integrate counselling services

This approach suggests that preventative mental health support is more effective than reactive intervention. By first creating a sense of safety and belonging, students may become more open to discussing deeper struggles such as homesickness or stress.

4.1.6 Overlooked Factors: Consistency and Commitment

Sangeetha stresses the importance of seriousness, consistency, and long-term commitment in maintaining a social hub. This suggests that one-time events or short-term projects are insufficient. Students need reliability. If engagement spaces are inconsistent, students may disengage permanently. She expresses difficulty in reaching certain students and highlights communication challenges. This implies that accessibility and information distribution strategies are critical components of social infrastructure.

4.2 Interview with Student 1

Student 1 (27 years old) is currently pursuing a master's degree at BSBI in Hamburg. As a more mature international student who has been living in Germany for one year, their perspective reflects a later life-stage experience of adaptation.

4.2.1 Perception of Existing Student Spaces

Student 1 expresses declining interest in university-organized events, particularly parties. While such events may initially seem appealing when new, they quickly lose

meaning once academic and personal responsibilities increase. They describe these events as repetitive and lacking added value. This suggests that traditional student events (e.g., parties) may fail to provide long-term engagement, especially for older or postgraduate students. Unlike first-year students seeking novelty, mature students appear to seek depth and meaning.

4.2.2 Community Over Events

When asked what would motivate participation, Student 1 repeatedly emphasizes community, not specific activities. They are less concerned with what the event is and more concerned with feeling personally welcomed, knowing the people involved, and being meaningfully engaged in planning or organizing events.

They describe wanting to feel “engaged” and part of something consistent, rather than being passively invited. This indicates a desire for relational belonging rather than event-based participation. Student 1 seeks emotional connection and continuity rather than entertainment. Feeling seen and included appears crucial to them. This supports Manzini’s (2023) argument that participation and shared ownership are central to meaningful social engagement, as individuals are more likely to connect with initiatives in which they feel actively involved rather than passively invited.

4.2.3 Barriers to Participation

Student 1 shares that they experience discomfort with parties because they feel pressured to socialize. They value choosing when, how, and with whom they interact. This reflects Fonagy’s (2025) concept of autonomy, where individuals need to feel control over their choices and participation in order to maintain psychological wellbeing. Social environments that feel obligatory may create psychological resistance. Even though Student 1 states they like socializing, they do not want it to be forced or central to the activity. This highlights that they desire connection but resist environments where social interaction is the primary objective. This suggests that low-pressure, optional interaction environments may be more effective.

4.2.4 Preference for Purpose-Driven Interaction

Toward the end of the interview, Student 1 responds positively to the idea of creating or working on something together instead of “just talking.” This suggests that task-based or activity-based engagement may feel safer and more meaningful. When interaction is structured around a shared goal (e.g., creating, organizing, volunteering), socialization becomes secondary and more natural.

4.2.5 Age and Life Stage Considerations

At 27 while doing a master’s degree, Student 1 shares that they don’t identify with typical undergraduate social culture. Their decreased interest in parties and preference for meaningful engagement reflects greater maturity, career or personal priorities and a

desire for deeper relationships over casual networking. A student hub targeting all universities in Hamburg must account for varying life stages. Programming that appeals only to younger undergraduate culture risks excluding older or postgraduate students.

4.3 Interview with Student 2

Student 2 (22 years old) has recently completed two semesters abroad at the University of Hamburg, while studying German Business Management at the University of Southampton in England. Their experience as an exchange student provides insight into how temporary or international students navigate social infrastructure in Hamburg.

4.3.1 Awareness of Existing Student Spaces

Student 2 shares that they are not aware of any centralized physical space dedicated to students across Hamburg. However, they are familiar with the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), which organizes events such as pub crawls and social outings. They describe ESN as: event-oriented, decentralized, and dependent on external venues (not tied to a physical space). Student 2 believes there's a structural gap in Hamburg's student ecosystem: there are organizers, but no central hub. ESN functions as a network rather than a venue. While this offers flexibility, it may reduce cohesion and long-term continuity. They also suggest that owning or operating within a familiar space could improve consistency and quality control (e.g., fewer logistical conflicts with venue owners).

4.3.2 Spatial Preferences: Separation of Functions

A strong theme in this interview is spatial design. Student 2 clearly differentiates between: study environments (moderate noise, accessible, not overstimulating) and social environments (relaxed, lively, engaging). They believe these functions should be separated but connected within the same building. For example: a café-style study zone, separate from a social common room (e.g., pool table, pub quiz space).

This suggests that mixed-use spaces risk functional conflict. Students who want to focus may feel disrupted by social noise, while those seeking relaxation may feel constrained by the academic atmosphere. Their proposal reflects zoning principles in user-centered design: clearly defined areas support different user needs while maintaining cohesion. This also aligns with Self-Reg (Bilotta, 2025) principles, which suggest that environments supporting different sensory and cognitive needs can help reduce stress and improve emotional regulation.

4.3.3 Barriers to Participation

Student 2 explains that they perceive existing events in Hamburg as boring or underwhelming. They suggest that attendance depends heavily on whether events are

effectively marketed. The decision to attend events appears highly influenced by risk perception. If students cannot visualize the experience, they may avoid attending. This highlights marketing not as superficial promotion, but as a trust-building mechanism. Transparency reduces uncertainty.

4.3.4 Event Diversity and Personal Preference

Student 2 emphasizes that different students are motivated by different types of events. Some enjoy pub quizzes and club nights, while others may enjoy more relaxing activities like painting and creative sessions, or running clubs. They note that no single format appeals universally. This suggests that inclusivity requires diversified programming. A central hub should avoid targeting only one social type (e.g., party-oriented students). However, Student 2 also acknowledges that event success often depends on attendance volume and group dynamics, meaning community momentum is self-reinforcing.

4.3.5 Venue vs. Organization: Strategic Positioning

Student 2 draws a distinction between ESN's event-based structure and the proposed hub's venue-based structure. They note that ESN prioritizes flexibility and variety, yet it lacks a central venue, which they believe could increase scale and cohesion. They also believe that while a shared venue may reduce flexibility, it can increase quality, identity and a sense of belonging. They ultimately suggest that a central hub could unify students and improve visibility, provided it clearly differentiates itself from existing organizations.

4.4 Interview with Student 3

Student 3 (23 years old) has been studying Medicine at UMCH in Hamburg for 3 years. As an international student navigating a relatively new cultural and linguistic environment, their experience reflects the challenges of integration, visibility, and inclusion within the city's student landscape over a longer period of time.

4.4.1 Lack of Visibility and Discoverability

Student 3 reports not being aware of any centralized student space in Hamburg and has not participated in events outside their university. When they actively searched for activities upon arriving in Germany, they found nothing clearly accessible or visible. This suggests a major issue of discoverability. The problem may not be the total absence of activities, but rather that they are not clearly branded, centralized, or visible to new students. The student describes wanting something that "screams" that it is open and available. This indicates a need for strong identity, clarity, and accessibility in communication.

4.4.2 Inclusivity and Neutral Identity

Student 3 emphasizes wanting a place where everyone is welcome, no matter the religious or political affiliation, and that doesn't have dominance by a specific nationality or group. They show an example of events at their school often being created by a group of students from single nationalities only. Even if technically open to all, they perceive the naming, language use, and cultural dominance as creating psychological barriers. This highlights the difference between formal inclusion ("everyone is welcome") and perceived inclusion. Group identity markers (name, language, branding) can unintentionally create exclusivity. The student does not criticize cultural celebration itself, but expresses discomfort when events feel culturally homogenous.

4.4.3 Language as a Structural Barrier

Student 3 explains that when events are conducted primarily in German, participation becomes difficult for international students. Language functions as both a practical and psychological barrier. Even if events are technically open, linguistic dominance can reduce accessibility and increase social anxiety. This suggests that a common language (English) may be crucial for inclusivity in an international student hub.

4.4.4 Preference for Activity-Based Socialization

Student 3 expresses interest in hands-on and shared activities, including: creative workshops, gender-specific safe spaces (e.g., girls' nights) and outdoor activities. They emphasize activities over academic or study-oriented events. This reinforces a recurring theme across interviews: structured, shared activities reduce social pressure and create natural interaction. Interestingly, while Student 3 wants universal inclusivity, they also value occasional identity-based safe spaces. This suggests that inclusivity does not necessarily mean eliminating subgroup experiences entirely but rather balancing them.

4.4.5 Psychological Need for Open Belonging

Student 3 repeatedly states a desire to feel that they can simply "be there." They describe the absence of a space that visibly communicates: "Here you can belong." They also express having "given up" searching for student activities due to lack of clarity. This indicates disengagement caused by repeated unsuccessful attempts to connect. When students fail to find accessible entry points, they may withdraw rather than persist. The student clearly wants connection and integration but lacks accessible pathways. This reflects Fonagy's (2025) concept of relatedness, which identifies belonging and social connection as fundamental psychological needs necessary for wellbeing.

4.5 Affinity Mapping

Based on the key insights gathered from the interviews, an affinity map was created to identify patterns and recurring themes. These will help guide the decisions on creating the concept for project Student Hub. Identifying these shared themes reflects Manzini's (2024) view that social innovation emerges through collective understanding of lived experiences, rather than purely top-down design solutions.

The findings showed 5 themes:

- **Visibility & Availability of Student Hubs in Hamburg:** Dedicated spaces for students to socialize are scarce and often hard to find. Since consistency and visibility are key to maintaining student engagement, this gap limits their impact. This creates a large gap in the market that can be filled with our proposal of the Student Hub.
- **Culture, Language & Age:** Findings show that cultural and age diversity can create barriers to student socialization, highlighting the need for balance. When organizing the student hub, we should cater to a broad audience, taking cultural and age differences into account. It's also important to recognize hidden social structures that may amplify these differences. Additionally, language accessibility must be considered to ensure all students feel welcome.
- **Belonging & Community:** Belonging is key to student wellbeing. The Student Hub should offer ongoing, structured activities that build trust and meaningful connections. Rather than just providing a space to socialize, we should lead socialization through shared activities and engagement.
- **Building Trust & Reaching Students:** Consistency, visibility, and long-term dedication are essential for sustaining student engagement. Students may avoid events that focus solely on socializing due to perceived social pressure or lack of autonomy. The perceived quality and clarity of communication strongly influence engagement. A physical hub could fill a structural gap by consolidating scattered initiatives into one recognizable identity.
- **Meaningful Activities:** Student engagement increases when social activities feel purposeful and connected to personal or career goals. Hands-on, collaborative activities can lower social barriers and foster authentic connections. A successful student hub should integrate multiple environments within a single location while preventing functional clashes. Offering variety and ensuring a critical mass of participants is essential for sustained engagement. Shared activities create safer and more effective entry points for connection than unstructured socializing.

These themes highlight the importance of belonging and participation in social environments, reinforcing Fonagy's (2025) concept of relatedness as a key component of wellbeing.

5. Conceptual Service Design

5.1 Service Proposal and Purpose

Based on the insights gathered through literature review and qualitative interviews, this project proposes the development of a city-wide Student Hub in Hamburg. The concept aims to provide an accessible social environment where students from different institutions can interact, participate in shared activities, and build meaningful connections and friendships.

The interviews revealed that students often struggle to discover or access existing social spaces in Hamburg. Activities are fragmented across universities and organizations, limiting visibility and participation. The Student Hub addresses these issues by providing a clearly identifiable physical space dedicated to student interaction.

Many students reported that traditional university events, such as parties or networking nights, often feel superficial or intimidating. Several participants emphasized a preference for activity-based interaction, where socialization occurs naturally through shared tasks rather than direct social pressure. The hub therefore prioritizes collaborative and creative activities such as workshops, hobby groups, and community-led events.

The research also highlights the importance of belonging and repeated interaction for mental wellbeing. According to the literature, social connection is a key protective factor against loneliness and stress among students. By providing consistent programming and an open environment, the hub encourages ongoing participation rather than one-time events.

The Student Hub also aims to provide a neutral and inclusive environment where students from diverse backgrounds can interact without institutional or cultural dominance. It specifically addresses the barriers that international students often face, such as language differences, cultural unfamiliarity, and limited knowledge of local social structures.

5.2 Stakeholders

Designing a city-wide student hub requires collaboration between multiple actors across institutional and community levels. Ezio Manzini (2014) argues that social innovation emerges through dynamic processes involving diverse stakeholders who participate in different ways throughout the design and implementation of solutions. Within this framework, designers act not only as creators but also as facilitators and mediators who support collaboration between institutions, users, and community actors.

Following this perspective, a stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted to identify the key actors involved in the potential development and operation of the proposed Student Hub (see Figure 1).

The mapping shows that while students are the primary users of the service, successful implementation depends on collaboration with universities, municipal actors, and community organizations. Institutional partners provide resources and legitimacy, while operational stakeholders such as organizers and volunteers ensure that activities remain consistent and responsive to student needs. This reflects Manzini's view that social innovation is sustained through networks of actors rather than single institutions.

5.3 Persona

A persona was developed based on insights from the interviews to guide the design and implementation of this project. It helped clarify the priorities, focus on the users' needs, and foster empathy for the target audience throughout the design process.

Mario Rossi, 26

- Nationality: Italian
- Lived in Hamburg for 4 months
- Studies MA Visual Communication at BSBI Hamburg
- Languages spoken: Italian, Spanish, German (A1 beginner)
- Interests: painting, Star Wars, video games

Biography: Mario recently moved to Hamburg to pursue a master's degree. When he first arrived, he was very excited about making new friends, engaging in community activities and experiencing German culture. He was, however, disappointed to see that his school organizes very few events, and that there are no places for him to hang out or study without having to spend money.

Goals

- Find friends while studying abroad
- Feel a stronger sense of student community and sense of belonging in Hamburg
- Balance social life with academics

Frustrations

- Hard to find activities to participate in
- Little access to socializing with students from other institutions
- Difficulty finding activities that cater to international students due to language barriers

Needs

- Opportunities to connect through shared interests (like painting nights, themed parties and movie marathons)
- A relaxed environment where socializing is optional rather than forced
- A consistent place where students regularly gather
- Clear communication about events and activities

Quote: «I'm not just looking for places to drink and party, there's plenty of that already. I'm looking for somewhere I can chill and meet some cool like-minded people»

5.4 Design Response to Student Needs: Spatial, Temporal, Social, and Digital Layers

Based on the needs identified in our persona, four key design themes were developed to guide the Student Hub's creation.

5.4.1 Spatial Concept and Environment

The hub should be in a central easily accessible location in Hamburg. Insights from the interviews suggest that students wish for different environments within the Student Hub, depending on their needs and comfort levels. The spatial layout of the Student Hub is designed to support multiple forms of interaction while reducing social pressure, and includes several interconnected zones:

- Study zone: will be reserved for students who wish for a calm environment to do their work and study. This zone will be a separate room with noise cancelling wall elements to ensure it stays quiet. There will be plenty of desks with comfortable chairs, big windows with natural light, and speakers playing calming music and nature sounds.
- Creative zone: a flexible area for workshops, art sessions, and collaborative projects. Here there will be tables arranged in collaborative layouts, plenty of storage space with creative supplies, and a screen if any teaching is required. This area will be perfect for hosting creative workshops and other DIY events.
- Communal zone: an open comfortable space designed for informal conversation and group interaction. There will be multiple sections with couches, tables and chairs, and a large TV screen for movie nights. A vending machine and coffee machine will be available for students that wish to purchase snacks and drinks. This area will be perfect for hosting parties, informal gatherings and “chill-out” sessions.

Separating these zones allows students to choose their level of social engagement, supporting autonomy while maintaining a sense of shared community (Fonagy, 2025).

5.4.2 Temporal Design

The Student Hub is designed with a temporal structure that balances routine and flexibility, recognizing that consistent social engagement is key to fostering belonging and wellbeing (Fonagy, 2025; Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Activities will be organized across weekly cycles to promote repeated, low-pressure interaction, allowing students to build familiarity with the space, the community, and each other. This approach aligns with the Self-Reg framework (Bilotta, 2025), which emphasizes predictability and structured environments to reduce stress and support emotional regulation through restorative activities.

Micro-interactions such as study groups, casual meetups, or game nights can occur daily and require minimal commitment. These interactions lower the threshold for participation, accommodating students who prefer informal, optional engagement (like Student 1 & 3). By embedding micro-interactions into everyday routines, the hub strengthens a sense of continuity and gradual integration into the community, supporting relatedness and psychological safety (Fonagy, 2025).

Macro-interactions like structured creative workshops, volunteering projects, and themed parties, can occur weekly and provide opportunities for deeper engagement, skill-building, and purposeful socialization. These sessions cater to students motivated by goal-oriented participation, reflecting Student 1's preference for hands-on collaboration and Student 2's insight that activities must feel meaningful to maintain engagement.

By combining micro- and macro-interactions, the Student Hub accommodates different levels of social comfort, life stages, and motivational needs, directly addressing the barriers identified in the research: time constraints, social pressure, and lack of consistent opportunities for belonging (Student 1, Student 2, Student 3; Sangeetha George).

5.4.3 Social & Participation Layer

In the Student Hub, students are not passive users but active co-creators of their social environment, reflecting Manzini's (2023) principle that citizens bring lived experience and contextual knowledge to the design of social innovation. By engaging students in planning, organizing, and leading activities, the hub leverages their creativity and personal insights to create spaces and experiences that are relevant, inclusive, and meaningful.

Students will get the chance to participate in volunteering and work roles, helping to plan weekly events, manage different zones within the hub, and lead workshops. This structure allows them to contribute purposefully while developing a sense of ownership, competence, and relatedness, directly addressing the psychological needs highlighted by Fonagy (2025) and the insights from Student 1 and Student 2 regarding meaningful

participation.

By positioning students as co-creators, the hub ensures that social spaces are shaped collaboratively, rather than imposed top-down, increasing relevance, engagement, and sustainability. It also transforms social participation into a learning and leadership opportunity, where students gain skills and confidence while contributing to a vibrant, inclusive community.

5.4.4 Digital Layer

The Student Hub will be supported by a dedicated app or digital platform, designed to enhance accessibility, visibility, and participation. This platform addresses a key insight from Student 3: students need clear, discoverable entry points into social opportunities (“need something that screams it’s open”). By centralizing information, the platform ensures students can quickly identify available activities, spaces, and collaborative opportunities. Key functionalities of the platform can include a calendar where students can explore upcoming workshops, volunteering opportunities, career-related activities, and casual social events. Another digital feature could be a feedback forum where students can share their opinions on how the Student Hub is managed and contribute suggestions for improvement. This reflects Ezio Manzini’s (2023) theory that participants should be actively involved in shaping services by contributing ideas and voicing their perspectives within the design process. By integrating a digital platform, the Student Hub connects physical and virtual experiences, increasing transparency, encouraging participation, and empowering students to engage on their own terms.

6. Conclusion

This project highlighted the complexity involved in designing services that address social challenges related to mental health, social belonging, and student wellbeing. The research process demonstrated that these issues are multifaceted and interconnected, requiring extensive investigation and contextual understanding.

The project involved conducting qualitative and secondary research, identifying key insights, and translating these findings into a conceptual service proposal. Given the relevance of the topic to the local student context, particular attention was paid to grounding design decisions in empirical data and participant perspectives rather than relying on subjective assumptions. This approach supported the development of a proposal that reflects identified user needs and challenges.

The final design proposal represents a focused conceptual framework rather than a comprehensive implementation plan. Initial ambitions included the development of a visual identity, marketing strategy, digital platform, and spatial design concepts. However, time constraints necessitated prioritizing the service design framework and its

alignment with research findings and theoretical perspectives. While this limited the level of detailed visual and practical development, it enabled a stronger emphasis on evidence-based design decisions.

Ethical and social considerations played a significant role throughout the design process. The proposed concept seeks to foster an inclusive environment that accommodates diverse social comfort levels and cultural backgrounds. Design decisions also considered factors such as accessibility, affordability, and opportunities for low-pressure participation, with the aim of reducing barriers to engagement.

The findings indicate considerable potential for further development and investigation. Future research could expand the scope by examining existing student hubs and community spaces through comparative case studies to better understand effective operational models and best practices. Additionally, while the present project focused primarily on mental wellbeing and social belonging, future work could place greater emphasis on accessibility, exploring how such initiatives can better support students with diverse physical, social, and cultural needs. These considerations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive service design within higher education contexts.

Figures and Tables

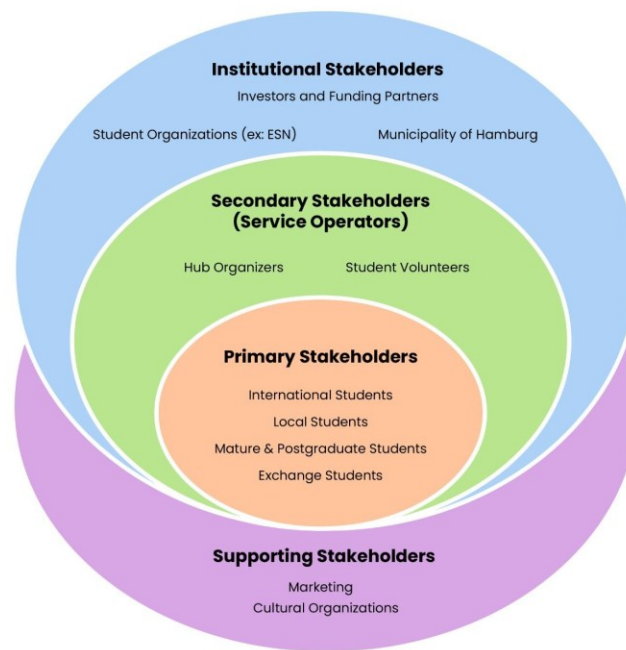


Figure 1. Proposed stakeholder map for the service design

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The AI tool did not generate original research data, conduct independent research, or make final analytical decisions. All research design, data collection, interpretation of findings, conclusions, and design outcomes were developed and validated by the author. The author reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted content to ensure its accuracy, originality, and alignment with the study's objectives.

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