Researching under-represented groups: how to empower students through targeted learning development support

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ABSTRACT: The Scottish Government has tasked Higher Education Institutions with improving the recruitment, retention and progression of students who are classified as living within the lowest deprivation quintile according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Scottish Government, 2012). The Scottish Funding Council allocates ringfenced funding for this purpose and negotiates specific outcome agreements with each institution to measure and evaluate success. As an initiative funded in this way, the School of Health and Life Science's Learning Development Centre (LDC) at Glasgow Caledonian University is required to support students from low participation postcodes.

The LDC provides enhancement-led, learning support to all students in the School through a blend of timetabled, in-programme teaching, workshops and one to one appointments. Support for, and monitoring of, those identified as belonging to the 'multiple deprivations' category (MD20s), however, is becoming an increasing priority. Whilst clearly a desirable aim in terms of social justice and widening participation, it is less obvious how best to target and measure support. The risks of stigmatising, alienating or even creating dependency amongst what is surely a heterogeneous group are manifold.

This paper will report on research conducted by the LDC members that attempted to better understand the diverse group of 'MD20 students' who attend, or potentially attend programmes within the School. The aim of the project was to provide an evidence-base on which further support activities could be built. Cognisant of the diversity of the group in question and the risk of labelling or categorising students, the project employed a narrative or biographical approach which aimed to capture and explore the individual life histories of students (Field, Merrill & West, 2012). In particular, it investigated the paths their lives had taken to lead them to study at university, how they felt about the MD20 focus and what kind of support, if any, would empower them to succeed in their studies. Alongside in-depth, qualitative exploration of the issues, academic performance and baseline demographic data were collected to gather as full a picture as possible of the group in question.

1. Introduction

As a result of the economic downturn, The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has taken an 'outcomes based approach' to funding post-compulsory education for the period 2012-2015 (SFC, 2012a). Eight outcomes have been identified including efficient and effective college structures, an internationally competitive research base and, most importantly for this project, 'access for people from the widest possible range of backgrounds'. Each Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Scotland must, in negotiation with the SFC, outline how it will meet these outcomes based on their strategic planning, demographics, strengths etc.

The SFC measures access using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), although HEIs are encouraged to use this alongside any other measures of deprivation that they feel would allow them to evaluate success. This is a system by which the Scottish Government divides the country into 'datazones' and ranks the level of deprivation in each area based on

a comparison of 38 indicators, involving domains such as income, employment, health and education (Scottish Government, 2012). The datazones are ranked from 1 (most deprived) to 6505 (least deprived), with each area or postcode consisting of approximately 800 people. The information is used to target policy and funding to specific areas. The Index is usually described in terms of centiles, with those postcodes in the lowest fifth representing the areas experiencing the greatest deprivation (known as MD20). Glasgow City has a disproportionate share of those living within Scotland's most deprived areas. 26% of the country's MD20 population live within the city limits. Glasgow also lays claim to 45% of the Scottish population living within the lowest 5 centiles of the deprivation index.

As a new university that prides itself on a reputation for widening participation (GCU, 2013), Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) receives substantial funding under the SFC's 'access' outcome. The recruitment and retention of students from under-represented groups, including those residing in MD20 postcodes, is a key institutional priority. Part of this funding is directed into each of the three Academic Schools' Learning Development Centres (LDCs). Although each LDC operates differently, based on the School's specific programmes and student populations, they all provide learning development support with a view to improving progression and retention of all students. How best to support MD20 students and whether current activities and services are used by this particular group remains little understood, however. The LDC in the School of Health and Life Sciences set out to explore these issues.

2.   Views from policy and research

Whilst there may be consensus on the need to widen access to higher education and support those who undertake learning at that level, how this is best achieved remains a matter of some debate, at policy, institutional and research level. GCU's 2013/2014 Outcome Agreement focusses on 'inclusivity' rather than specific provision or support for target groups: 'Our new Strategy for Learning enshrines our aim to continue to improve on progression, retention and completion for all our students'. Such an approach is supported by the findings of 'What works?' a recent, large-scale Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded project (Thomas, 2012). It suggested that, whilst general activities can be supplemented by targeted support, nurturing a sense of belonging amongst students is key to retention and success. Any approach should, therefore, be mainstream and 'opt-out' –an embedded aspect of HE that encourages collaborative working between staff and students and support before crises occur.

Some researchers have challenged prevailing notions of widening participation, perhaps signifying that mainstream support is preferable to specific provision. Williams (2011), for example, has argued that the language of former government policy may have resulted in 'psychological disadvantage' amongst those categorised as 'socially excluded'; the ubiquity of the term 'support' implying a vulnerable, infantilised group. Leathwood and Hey (2009) similarly suggest that strategies targeting 'non-traditional' students are constructed in terms of a deficit, one which seeks to change the student. Yet, whilst there are undoubtedly difficulties with such a problematising discourse, it seems clear that those who enter HE from non-traditional backgrounds—mature learners, those from socially deprived neighbourhoods etc—experience particular challenges. They may have less access to physical and emotional resources and fewer academic role models, suggesting that specific forms of support are fundamental to social inclusion (Benson et al, 2012). Pampaka et al (2012) argue that there is no single dominant factor for learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, yet such students have a wider range of issues than 'higher social class' students.

The SFC's outcomes approach seems to suggest they favour targeted interventions and specific targets. It is certainly possible that purely mainstream activities may fail to engage certain groups of learners. The vast majority of the LDC's funding is derived from SFC

access monies provided to GCU. There is thus a moral, financial and politically expedient need to attend to the issue of MD20 students at the very least. There is evidence that strategies which aim to improve access and support for specific groups can be successful. Institutional interventions and monitoring, championed and supported by Buttle UK (2012), have resulted in significant improvements in the recruitment and retention of Care Leavers, for example. The very fact that Buttle UK collates information on care leavers in HE has allowed for the evidenced recognition that such young people were hugely unrepresented in education. This focused attention has, according to Buttle UK, 'enabled institutions to consider the needs of Care Leavers as distinct from other vulnerable groups' (2012, p8). MD20 students are clearly a very different group from Care Leavers, but this example demonstrates that the needs of certain leaners can remain unacknowledged unless their experiences are monitored and evaluated.

3. The project

3.1 Aims and objectives

It is evident an array of drivers, research findings and policy objectives impact on the issue of recruiting and retaining students resident in postcodes identified as experiencing multiple deprivations. The LDC provides enhancement-led, learning support to all students in the School through a blend of timetabled, in-programme teaching, workshops and one to one appointments (Mckendry, 2012). Support for, and monitoring of, those identified as belonging to the 'multiple deprivations' category, however, is becoming an increasing priority. Though a worthy goal, it is essential such support is considered, research-informed and eliminates or minimises any potential stigma associated with postcode ranking. Up to now, the voices and views of one of the most significant stakeholders involved, namely the students themselves, can often appear largely absent from the debate. As a team, we thus sought to provide an evidence-base on which further learning development support could be established.

The overall aim of the project was to improve understanding of the learning and teaching needs and experiences of the diverse group of MD20 students who attend, or potentially attend, programmes within the School of Health and Life Sciences. A number of objectives were identified:

- To use a narrative or biographical approach to capture individual life histories and student journeys from within the wider, diverse MD20 group (Field, Merrill & West, 2012).
- To explore the student experience and learning development needs of those entering higher education from under-represented groups.
- To employ qualitative instruments to gather data on whether, and in what ways, students within the MD20 category engage with LDC support.
- To understand the institutional policy and wider funding context of MD20 recruitment, retention and support.

3.2 Methodology

An inquiry/interpretative based approach provided the methodological foundation for the project. In particular, student data collection harnessed narrative, life story methods aimed at exploring individual biographical narratives: the paths their lives have taken to lead them to study at university; how they feel about the MD20 focus and what kind of support, if any, will allow them to succeed in their studies. As researchers, we aimed to situate the project within the growing body of literature on adult transitions and lifelong learning (Field, Gallagher Ingram, 2009) using biographical or life history research as 'an important and powerful way of seeing learning as a fundamental dimension of living' (Field, Merrill & West, 2012, p. 80).

Such a particularist method can potentially suffer from what Field et al (2012) label 'excessive methodological individualism': stories are embedded in specific circumstances and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and influenced or conditioned by the dialogue between narrator and researcher. The potential for generalisability or extrapolation are limited. Yet the approach allows for the collection of rich data and is mitigated by other mixed methods. These, though primarily qualitative in nature, allow for the widest possible collection of relevant data and the greatest scope to iteratively develop further cycles of research. The project thus involved documentary examination of policy data, performance and retention monitoring and the tracking of LDC usage data. The analysis of the mixed data drew on indicators from social and cultural capital to help understand the various perspectives of the students and gain in depth knowledge of the student population and its issues.

Ethical approval for the project was sought and granted by the School's Research Ethics Committee.

3.3 Research phases

The project consisted of several research phrases:

1. Statistical analysis of performance and progression data and LDC data, documentary and policy audit.
2. Semi-structured interviews with students currently studying in the School who live within the MD20 residential category.
3. Semi-structured interviews with staff members with a role in recruiting, retaining and supporting students from MD20 backgrounds.
4. Semi-structured interviews with college students considering studying in the School who live within the MD20 residential category.
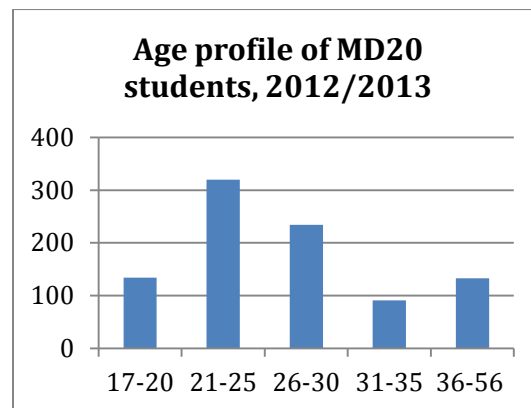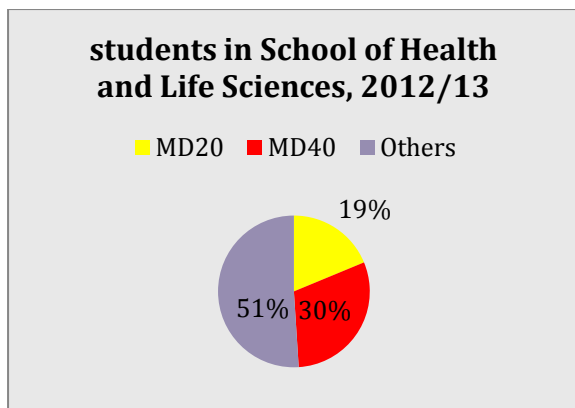
At the time of writing, phases one and two are near to completion with phases three and four planned for the next few months.

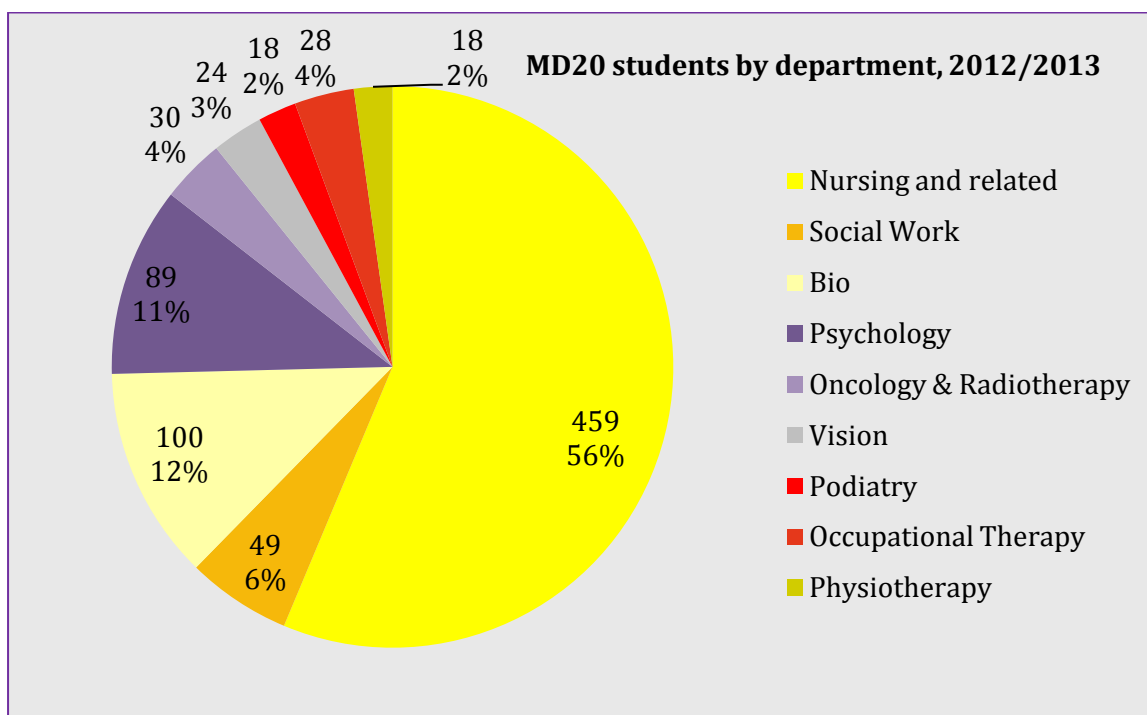## 4.   Phase 1: quantitative data collection and analysis

4.1 Profile of MD20 students in the School

MD20 students are identified from within the broader population of full-time, Scottish-domiciled students. Such a measurement inevitably excludes other categories of students, many of whom may also reside in, or come from, MD20 areas or their equivalent in other parts of the UK. Part-time, postgraduate and international students and those moving from the rest of the UK are not included. For academic year 2012/2013, 19% of the School's full-time, undergraduate, Scottish-domiciled student population lived within an MD20 area according to the university's records. For new students entering the School, this figure rises to 25%. The School recruits a greater percentage of students from these areas than other institutions. SFC (2012a) research suggests that the MD20 group accounted for 14% of the total university population in Scotland in 2010/11, and represented 11% of the population at Scottish old universities.

Since this was such a significant proportion of full-time students, institutional data was further explored to try to determine the broader demographic profile of the group.

students in School of Health and Life Sciences, 2012/13

■ MD20 ■ MD40 ■ Others

19%
30%
51%

Age profile of MD20 students, 2012/2013

17-20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36-56

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2013), mature students are defined as those who are aged 21 or over on commencing their course. 85% of students in the School's MD20 group fall into this category, 50% are over 25 years of age and 24% are over 30.

MD20 students by department, 2012/2013

■ Nursing and related
■ Social Work
■ Bio
■ Psychology
■ Oncology & Radiotherapy
■ Vision
■ Podiatry
■ Occupational Therapy
■ Physiotherapy

459 56%
49 6%
100 12%
89 11%
30 4%
24 3%
18 2%
28 4%
18 2%

Over half of the MD20 students (56%) were undertaking nursing degrees and a further 11% were enrolled in Psychology. Further work is required to explore the ethnicity and gender breakdown of the MD20 group. In addition, details on the percentage declaring a disability and the number entering university through FE would also be useful. Such characteristics are often used as part of a 'basket of measures' when targeting access (SFC, 2012a). Comparison with students in the least deprived centile (LD20) may also prove useful and will be undertaken in the future.

4.2 Usage of Learning Development Centre by MD20 students

The LDC follows an opt-out model of learning development support. Tailored, module-specific learning and teaching is delivered within classes ensuring all students receive academic skills development. Further 'opt-in' support is available however, and accounts for

a significant proportion of the LDC's activities. Students can sign up for workshops or request an individual or small group appointment with a lecturer to discuss an academic skills issue. Attendance at both workshops and appointments was tracked for trimester one and two of the current academic year in order to determine overall and MD20 usage. As the charts below show, MD20 students made up 19% of the School's population and accounted for 26% and 22% of workshop attendance in trimester 1 and 2 respectively. MD20 students would thus appear to be opting to attend extra-curricular activities in greater numbers than expected.
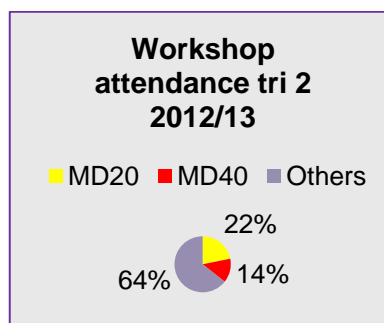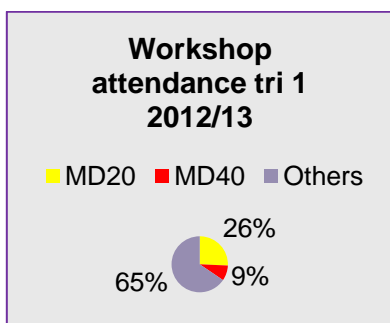
Similarly, whilst MD20 students represent 19% of the total School population, they accounted for 20% and 25% of the LDCs individual appointments in trimester 1 and 2.
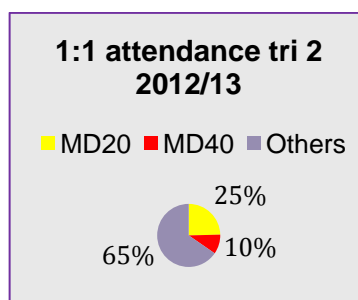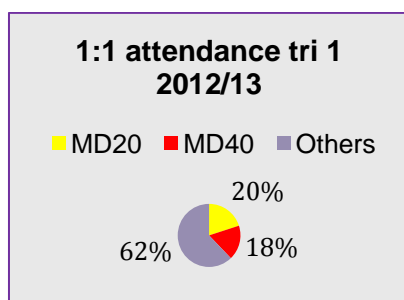

Once again, students from the MD20 category appear to be accessing the LDC at a proportionally high rate – they account for a greater portion of the LDC's activities than they constitute as a portion of the total undergraduate, full-time population.

4.3 Retention and progression data: is there a problem?

Initial exploration of LDC usage statistics appears reassuring and possibly suggests that current activities and publicity approaches are effective in attracting students from all groups, including those with MD20 backgrounds. Further work is required to examine if LDC support is effective, however, and a number of questions remain. What impact does engagement with the LDC have on retention and progression, for example, and is it possible to measure that impact? Also, a percentage of MD20 students in the School are accessing support but what of those who do not? It may be that they will engage in later years and at a time when they need it. It may be that they do not require academic skills support outwith their timetabled provision. The MD20 category is now being considered in the collation of institutional retention and progression data, thus some answers may be forthcoming in the near future. One of the key issues is whether MD20 students are as academically successful as their peers.

There are some indications that students from MD20 backgrounds are more vulnerable to academic failure or withdrawal than other students. The National Union of Students Scotland

(NNUS, 2011) compared retention rates of MD20 students and the total full-time, Scottish domiciled student population. Although somewhat dated, this research suggested that rates were continually lower for those from the bottom centile.

GCU retention rates
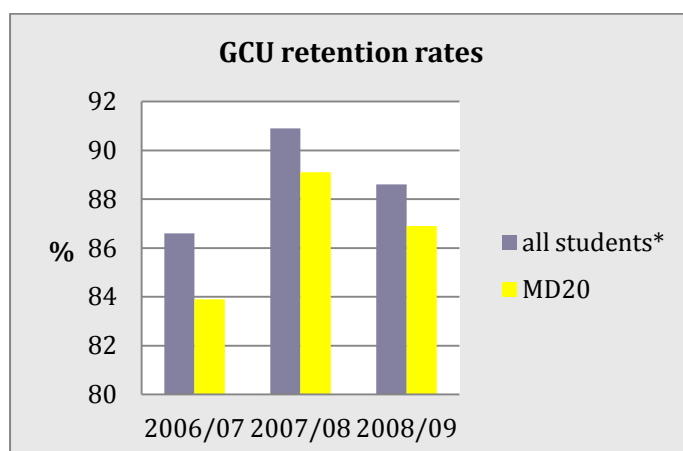
	all students	MD20
2006/07	86.60%	83.90%
2007/08	90.90%	89.10%
2008/09	88.60%	86.90%

More recent research from England highlights similar findings. The Leaving University Early research report (John-Adams, 2013), funded by HEFCE and conducted under the auspices of the Open University (OU) and the Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS), drew on data from more than 35,000 early leavers over the period 2006-2012. Key findings suggest that 'non-traditional' students are more likely to be early leavers than 'traditional' younger students. The former category included mature learners, those from neighbourhoods with low HE participation and those entering from FE. Several of these characteristics appear to coalesce with what we know of MD20 students in our School. There is also evidence that non-continuation is highest amongst mature students (SFC, 2012a). Given the age profile of MD20 students it is imperative that longitudinal monitoring of retention and progression is conducted with MD20 status as an additional identified characteristic. This work is now being undertaken and will inform further stages of the research.

5.   Phase 2: semi structured interviews with students

5.1 The interview process

In February 2013 an email invitation was sent to all students in the School who had been identified as living within an MD20 postcode. Eleven students responded and it proved possible to conduct interviews with nine of them. The table below outlines the profile of each interviewee. Although a convenience sample, they are nonetheless broadly representative of both the School population and the smaller MD20 category of students.

Code	Age	Year	Programme of study	Route to university
1	18	1	Psychology & interactive entertainment	Secondary school
2	49	1	Learning Disability Nursing	FE Access course
3	19	2	Psychology	Transferred from other HEI
4	35	3	Biomedical Science	Direct entry from FE

				(HND)
5	32	1	Social Work	FE Access course
6	33	1	Adult Nursing	FE Access course
7	36	1	Adult Nursing	FE Access course
8	36	1	Adult Nursing	HNC & FE Access Course
9	19	1	Diagnostic Imaging	HNC

Given the narrative methodology, semi-structured interviews were designed to unearth life journeys and biographies, to encourage participants to reflect upon and discuss their life path. Open ended questions were used and there was very little prompting. All four members of the project team conducted interviews after extensive discussion and planning. Time was spent between each, listening through recordings to develop a similar interview technique. Questions included 'Tell me about how you came to be studying here' and 'do you think that coming from an MD20 postcode has played a role in your life?'.

5.2 Coding and initial thematic analysis

Following verbatim transcription, each member of the research team coded the data individually before coming together to discuss emergent categories and themes. The richness of the data suggests that further analysis and theory generation is both possible and warranted and will be undertaken in the next few months using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial themes and sub-categories have been detailed in the mindmap below.
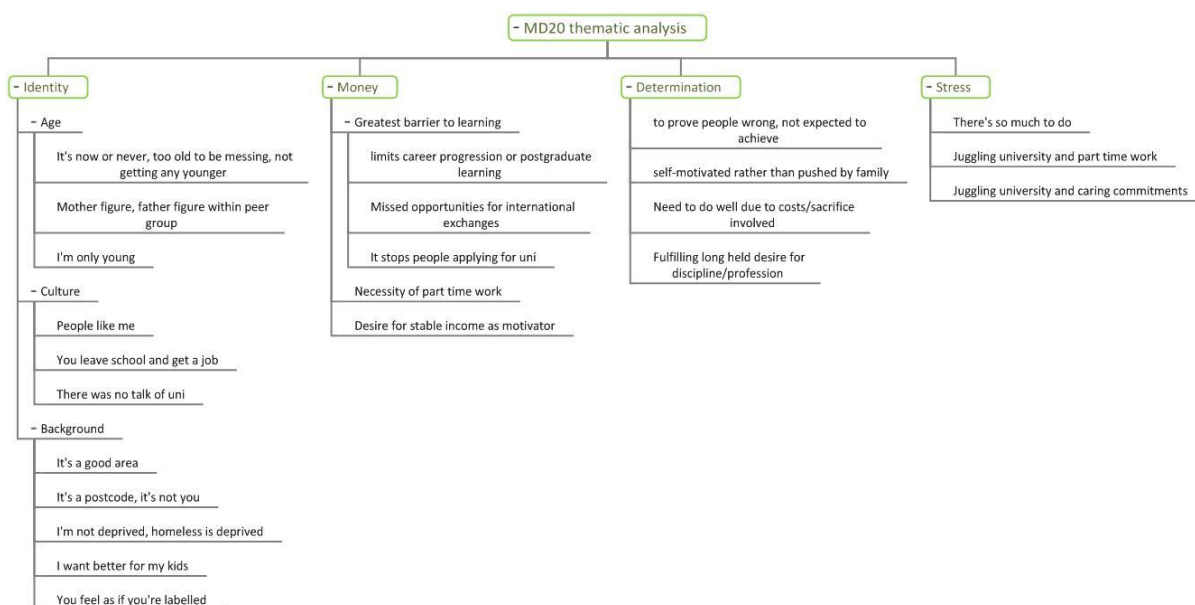
Thematic collation of the data has proven fruitful yet such an approach inevitably searches for similarities, patterns and differences between experiences. This does not necessarily allow for the illumination of individual student journeys and biographies. A case study approach has, thus, been an additional aspect of data analysis and will be completed shortly.

6. What's next

The MD20 category has proven useful in building understanding of the student profile and as a tool to monitor usage of the LDC and evaluate our reach. It is imperative that we determine the respective performance rates of the MD20 group and the general student population. Where there are differences, the LDC may need to adopt strategies specific to that group, though this does not appear necessary or fruitful at this point. The institution has a duty to ensure that those students who enroll on programmes are supported in the attainment of their degrees. If particular students are more vulnerable to academic difficulties, greater support may be necessary.

The identification of the MD20 category amongst students provoked discussion, anxiety and even some anger amongst participants in the project. Some students viewed the category as potentially stigmatising for example, and the group is as diverse as anticipated. Whilst it was never our intention to produce publicity materials or activities for that group alone, it appears that any targeting of support in this way may be counterproductive. The project has made clear that there are other categories or identities that could prove more useful when considering targeted support—mature learners, articulating students, those entering from FE, care-leavers and carers. These groups are often over-represented within the MD20 category and can face additional challenges in negotiating HE. Students also seem to more comfortably identify with these labels and may thus more readily engage with activities aimed at them.

These remain tentative conclusions, however. The project has a number of phases still to be completed. Staff interviews will be conducted over summer, and potential college students have already been identified. Further longitudinal tracking of MD20 student usage of the LDC and general progression will also continue.

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