Mature and Commuter Student Experience
at
Loughborough University

Professor Hilary McDermott

Study Team

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Mature Students

- Mature students account for approx. **30%** of UK undergraduates (*HESA, 2024*)

- Nationally, **81%** of full-time mature students progressed to their second year in 2021-22, **9%** fewer than younger students (*OfS, 2022*).

- Socioeconomic pressures have increased the number of UK undergraduate students living at home and commuting (*Adams, 2023*)

- Mature and commuter students frequently juggle additional responsibilities, limiting their engagement with university life (*Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018*).
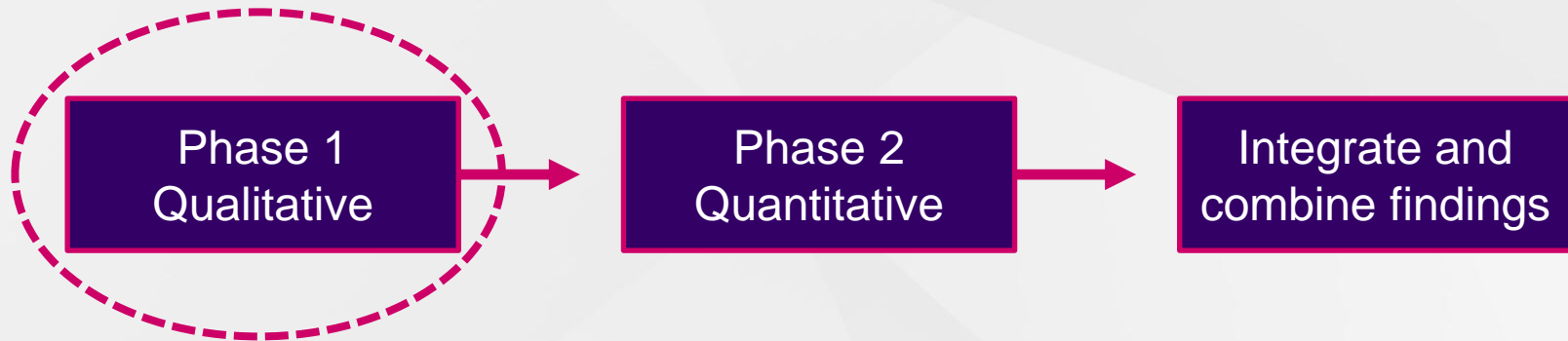
Study Objectives

i.   Explore how mature and/or commuter students experience the transition to Loughborough University

ii. Identify the challenges mature and/or commuter students face in adapting to academic and student life

iii. Understand how their personal and professional goals shape mature and/or commuter students' engagement with university

iv. Determine the types of support (academic, financial, social, institutional) that would enable mature and/or commuter students to succeed.

Study Methodology

- Adopted a sequential **exploratory design approach** (*Terrell, 2011*)

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│  Phase 1    │───────▶│  Phase 2    │───────▶│ Integrate and│
│ Qualitative │        │Quantitative │        │combine findings│
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- Qualitative data collection and analysis (i.e., semi-structured interviews and focus groups) will inform the development of an online survey for quantitative data collection

- Ethical approval, **LEON 21551**.

Qualitative Method

- **Focus groups** and **individual semi-structured interviews** with **16 mature and/or commuter undergraduate students** currently enrolled or withdrawn from Loughborough University

- *Mature student*: aged ≥21 years at the time of their initial undergraduate registration

- *Commuter student*: lived in Loughborough or elsewhere, alone or with non-students (e.g., parents), rather than in student-specific accommodation (e.g., university halls of residence).
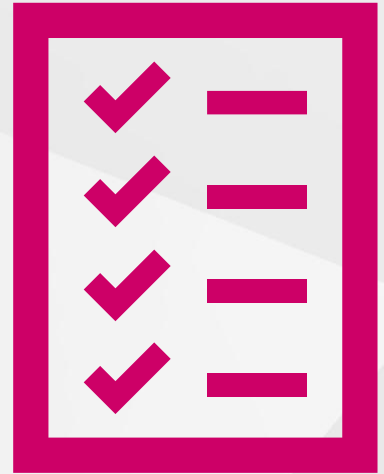
Key Qualitative Findings

1. Social Integration & Ageism

2. Challenges with Campus Facilities & Timetabling

3. Value & Challenges of Online Resources & Hybrid Learning

4. Academic & Staff Connections

5. Balancing Studies & Personal Life

1. Social Integration and Ageism

- Mature and commuter students described **challenges socially integrating** with their younger peers

- Felt like **outsiders** due to a significant age gap and a sense that the university community was not structured with them in mind

- Lack of age-related peer connection also contributed to a **sense of isolation**

➢ Highlights the **social and emotional exclusion** that many mature and commuter students experience, suggesting a need for strategies to **promote inclusion and foster belonging**.

2. Campus Facilities and Timetabling

- Commuter students highlighted the **difficulty of managing long gaps** between lectures
- Highlighted a **lack of comfortable and accessible spaces** to work or relax on campus
- Existing commuter facilities were frequently described as **inadequate**

➢ Suggest that minor improvements, such as better signage, more inclusive induction activities, and upgraded communal areas, could have a significant impact on the day-to-day experience of **commuter students**.

3. Online Resources and Hybrid Learning

- **Online learning resources** were **praised** by mature and commuting students

- Highlighted **inconsistencies** in the organisation and delivery of digital content

- The limited availability of **hybrid learning** options was a concern

➢ The findings suggest that digital tools were clearly valued. Yet, there is a need for greater consistency in digital practice and more inclusive hybrid learning options to accommodate the varied needs of our students.

"My lectures are always recorded, but my workshops and seminars are not. And that is really frustrating because if you're ill or if you have somewhere to be or if you have to be at work that day or anything, really… it's just really annoying".

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4. Academic and Staff Connections

- Mature students found it easier to connect with **academic staff** than with their younger peers

- Engagement in class led to greater interaction with staff, although this sometimes led to **further isolation** from younger students, reinforcing a sense of social isolation

- Some mature students also felt that teaching styles and assumptions about students' prior knowledge were **not inclusive**

➢ Suggests that while mature students often build stronger connections with academic staff this can inadvertently **deepen their separation** from younger peers, **reinforcing social isolation**.
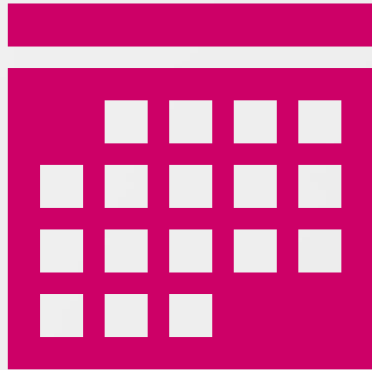
5. Balancing Studies and Personal Life

- Mature and commuting students demonstrated **strong time management** through structured schedules, calendars and to-do lists
- However, **intensive domestic** or **work demands due to financial pressures** hindered this
- An **unsustainable** work-life balance led some to **withdraw** from study.

➤ Suggests that mature and commuter students often excel in time management, but external pressures can undermine this strength.

Recommendations

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Top three recommendations

1. Dedicated social and study spaces

2. Mature Student Association

3. Expand hybrid learning provision

Study Methodology

Sequential Exploratory Design

Phase 1 Qualitative → Phase 2 Quantitative → Integrate and combine findings

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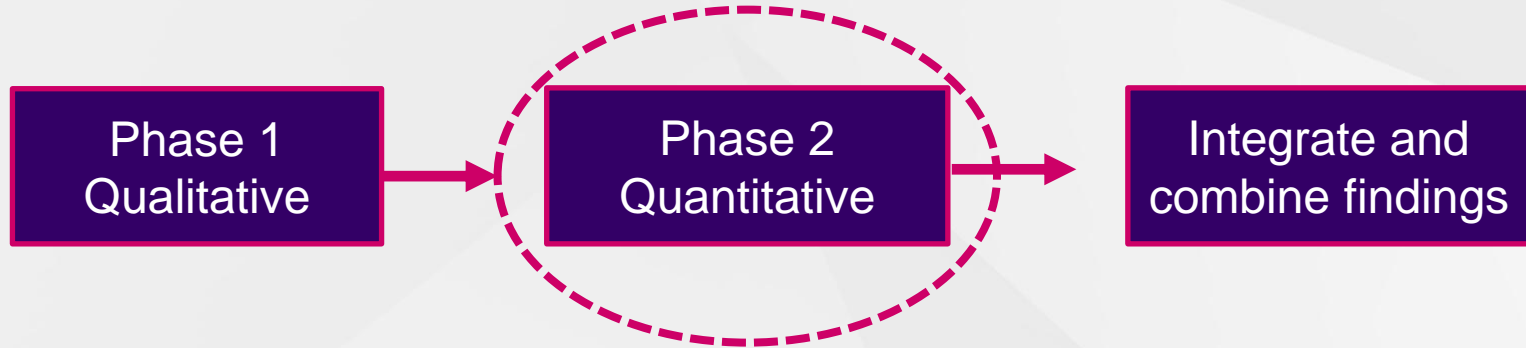
Thank you for Listening

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