There is an inevitability about the start of the English county cricket season. Rain will stop play and a team of 20 somethings will get roundly beaten by their professional opponents causing somebody to whinge about the ‘first-class’ status of university cricket.

First-class cricket has a long-standing association with higher education in the UK. Indeed, it is a tradition of the domestic first-class season to begin with a game against ‘the students’ that was once the sole privilege of Oxford and Cambridge University Cricket Clubs. Since 2000, this privilege has been shared among six University Centres of Cricketing Excellence spread regionally across England and Wales. Each receive an annual stipend from the Marylebone Cricket Club of £46,000 a year (cut from £92,000 in 2016) to maintain a programme of training and competition that is a recognised part of English cricket’s elite development structure.

Whilst the rain stayed largely at bay this year, it was another difficult start to the season for the MCC Universities (MCCUs) who were unable to prevent their opening first-class fixtures from becoming another damp squib. Cue the murmuring and perennial debate among those keen to protect the meaning of first-class cricket as their own elite preserve.

Writing in The Times, the former England Captain and Cambridge graduate Michael Atherton, has recently come to the MCCUs defence as he did once before in 2013. Their first-class status, he argues, is part of the symbolism that makes university an attractive proposition for talented young cricketers unsure of their long-term career prospects both inside and outside of the game. Atherton describes how the university system ‘acts as buffer between amateur and professional game’, delaying the speed at which young players commit themselves to, and become narrowed by, the occupational demands of professional sport. Having spent three years immersed in the experiences of this cricketing population, I could not agree more.

The findings from my research provide evidence that the MCCU centres of excellence are more than a performance pathway and route into professional cricket. Through combining a vocational experience with the transformative potential of a liberal education, they act as a successful identity intervention with an emerging adult population. For the young men and women who choose this route, they are afforded the opportunity to experiment with a

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cricket-identity without commitment, whilst exploring what else they are capable of. The structure of the university-cricket experience places players in a situation that encourages them to confront the question of self and the direction their life is taking which is not only a normal, but a healthy part of identity-formation in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

During their time as university cricketers, all players experience a tension between aspiration and reality. Through the MCCU system players come face-to-face with the working lifestyles of professional cricketers, and encounter some of the associated occupational pressures that force them to consider what cricket means in relation to their adult futures. For some, their experiences help to consolidate the centrality of cricket in the context of their developing lives, and a performance platform to help achieve their ambition. For others, it helps to dilute a cricketing-identity and open a space for the development and realisation of meaningful alternatives.

The journey of self-discovery that student-cricketers find themselves in via the MCCU pathway, becomes even more pertinent when read in context that the average age a professional playing career ends is 26. Some leave fed-up, or burnt out by the precariousness of short-term contracts or a lack of first-team opportunities. Most simply find themselves surplus to requirements forcing them to make a sudden and disorientating recalibration of their lives, just as their contemporaries in other fields are beginning to work it all out.

In my view, the measure of the MCCUs success should not be based on the volume of first-class cricketers they produce, or on how well they perform in difficult conditions against the counties, but on their role in helping young people develop the self and situational knowledge to make positive identity-decisions. In cricketing terms, the university system is about enabling talented cricketers to ‘find their level’ within the game by inspiring them to think beyond cricket and providing them with the flexibility to pursue cricket out of choice rather than necessity. For this to work, young cricketers require more than the opportunity and time for self-exploration. They require an authentic experience to anchor their exploration to, that removing the MCCUs ‘first-class’ status will ultimately undermine.