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Conceptual and evidence based research article

Student-contributed podcasts to support transition to higher education

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Abstract

Studies of undergraduate student satisfaction, academic performance and retention in Higher Education (HE) identify the critical importance of the first year for shaping their attitudes and approaches to learning. Positive transition into HE has a direct impact on students' later learning experience, particularly during their first year. Most interventions to support transitions are based on institution-driven approaches such as courses on learning and study skills. Here we describe how podcasting can be used to developing a new approach to support transition by tapping into the knowledge and experience of current undergraduates.

Keywords: Transition to Higher Education; Student-contributions to learning; Podcasting; Learning Technologies; First-year experience

Introduction

Issues related to transition from school to university

Transitions are defined as the 'capability to navigate change' (Gale & Parker, 2014). Entering HE is a big transitional phase in students' lives and they need to manage these changes well in order to complete their studies successfully. Multiple critical factors contribute to students' successful transition into HE, which requires looking at a more complete picture of students' experience and involves not only what happens within universities but also in their networks and families (Cashmore, Green, & Scott, 2010). Previous studies have discovered a range of factors associated with students' transition and retention rate, including pre-entry activities and induction (Thomas, 2013; Murtagh, Morris, & Thorpe, 2013); students' preparedness; transition support, curriculum development and data monitoring (Jones, 2008), and students' sense of belonging as well as engagement (Cashmore, Scott, & Cane, 2012).

For students, poor preparation for university life, unsatisfactory academic experiences, lack of social integration and financial issues are often identified as pivotal contributors to underachievement and drop out (Jones, 2008; Thomas, 2013). New entrants may hold misconceptions, as many are inadequately prepared for the university's assessment procedures, hours of face-to-face contact, the independent study required, the large size of lecture groups, and the choices to be made among modular options (Brunton et al., 2016; Mckendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014; Leese, 2010).

The issue of transition to HE is sometimes addressed using the concept of 'habitus' or 'institutional habitus'. 'Habitus' is derived from Bourdieu's work as a generative schema of embodied dispositions acquired through formative experiences, and it is often interpreted as social practices and beliefs as well as perceptions of a particular social class (Bourdieu, 1994; McNay, 1999). With regard to HE, Reay, David and Ball (2001, 2005) appropriated the concept of 'habitus' and they used 'institutional habitus' to explore the relationship between HE institutional practices and students' choices. Preparation for HE should therefore include understanding the 'institutional habitus' of HE, meaning the values and practices of cultural or social groups that are embedded in and mediated through the culture of an institution (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001, 2005). Here, 'cultural group' refers to young people and their families who bring their habituses into universities that could exert an impact on institutional culture, and vice versa. The organizational culture of a university will present a different institutional habitus that could mediate students' habituses (Morrison, 2007).

Educational expectations can be understood as part of one's habitus, and a mismatch between students' expectation and actual experience can lead to students' withdrawal (Rowley, Hartley, & Larkin, 2008). HE students' age, ethnicity, socio-economic background and family HE history are key attributes to students' preparedness for HE (Leese, 2010; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). Qualitative studies show that financial burden confronted by working-class students often undermines their commitment to academic study and cuts them off from university activities that could enhance their social and cultural capital. Moreover, often being the first generation to attend university, these students do not have a privileged understanding of HE system, given that limited insight is provided by their parents (Bradley & Ingram, 2013; McMillan, 2014). Those students who are unprepared to study at the university can feel like a 'fish out of water' (Thomas, 2002, p. 431).

Support for transition could bridge the gap between 'institutional habitus' and personal habitus, but higher education institutions typically respond by providing formal courses in study skills (Hultberg et al., 2008; Walker, Matthew, & Black, 2004; Knox, 2005). The knowledge and experience of students who have already made the transition have been little exploited. Such knowledge, referred to as 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998), is 'the socially embedded' informal knowledge prevailing in networks of friends, family, relatives and neighbours, the people who are considered as

‘people like me’ (Hutchings, 2003, p. 110). Contrastingly, ‘cold knowledge’ can be conceived as formal knowledge produced and disseminated by institutions, in this case, universities (Ball & Vincent, 1998). ‘Hot knowledge’ is often considered by potential applicants to be more trustworthy and more crucial for their decision-making process than that communicated through ‘official’ sources (Hutchings, 2003; Smith, 2011).

Podcasts

Literature reveals the social and technical potential of technologies to smooth students’ transition with informational and social support, preparing students prior to arrival, assisting students’ ongoing engagement and enhancing multi-dimensional communication (Lefever & Currant, 2010). Previous studies showed that technologies appear to be well-suited for helping students capture ‘hot knowledge’, finding common ground and reassurance that others are going through similar issues as well as in exchanging emotional support (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2010; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013).

Podcasting originated as a technology to create and distribute personal “radio shows” via the internet. It has now become a technology used to support learning, at least in more economically developed countries. Browne et al. (2008, p. 2) showed that podcasting is a tool that has “increased significantly in prominence” in UK universities. Increasing numbers of research papers published on podcasting indicate a growing interest from teachers, technologists and researchers in this field. Salmon and Edirisingha (2008) documented four approaches to using student-created podcasts to provide first-year support: addressing students’ misconceptions and anxiety about HE; developing their reflection skills; advising them on their assessed work; and developing their research skills. Pegrum, Bartle and Longnecker’s (2014) research with first-year Chemistry undergraduates examined the use of podcasting to promote a deep approach to learning that resulted in better learning outcomes. Their research showed that “under some circumstances creative podcasting may ... help to promote a deep learning approach” (ibid, p. 1). Popova, Kirschner and Joiner (2014), showed that “primer podcasts” - podcasts for students to prepare for lectures - “have a positive influence on learning” (ibid, p. 330). Podcasts have also been effective as a supplement to face-to-face teaching on a music and visual arts course taken by student teachers (Tam, 2012). As this literature shows, students using podcasts for their learning have reported that they value the flexibility offered as well as the cognitive and motivational benefits obtained from listening to them.

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Aims and research questions

Using podcasting and mobile devices familiar to HE students, our project aimed to tap into the knowledge and experience of students who recently made their transition to HE for the benefit of new entrants to HE. The project was associated with Leicester’s GENIE (Genetics Education Networking for Innovation and Excellence) Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning, which aimed to improve learner experience in HE. This study was built on earlier work on investigating the student experience of first year Biological Sciences students, where undergraduates chronicle their learning and social experiences by weekly video diaries.

Our project investigated the ways in which student-created podcasts might support new HE entrants’ transition into HE.

Methods

Developing podcasts and researching the impact

Our approach consisted of developing two sets of podcasts, making them available for students; and investigating their impact on student transition. Type A podcasts were developed for students about to start their first HE course, and Type B for those already in their first year. The content relevant for podcasts was identified through focus group interviews with Level 1 and 2 biological sciences students at the University of Leicester, and from the earlier GENIE student experience project. We developed and distributed podcasts with the help of a learning technologist with a science and teaching background.

Thirteen Type A podcasts (each 5 minutes) were developed and distributed to prospective students through a publicly accessible website and iTunes. These podcasts covered topics such as leaving home, making new friends, accommodation, managing money and the differences between school and university. Information about these podcasts was made available to the schools and colleges that were associated with GENIE CETL outreach programmes.

Type B podcasts were made available for the same cohort of students during their first year via Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Twenty four Type B podcasts were made to address transition issues for students in their first year, for example, progressing from first to second semester and first to second year, coping with exams, choosing modules, laboratory work, library projects, and productive activities in the summer vacation.

Personal hour-long interviews with eight students who had listened to Type A podcasts, and a further eight who listened to Type B podcasts were carried out to examine their views on how transition to HE can be supported by both types of podcasts. Type A research interviews were carried out during Semester 1. Type B interviews were carried out after students had completed their first year.

Recordings were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis was guided by relevant themes obtained from the literature on transition; for example, background (Leese, 2010), expectations and experiences (Rowley, Hartley & Larkin, 2008), and processes of making adjustment (Gray, Easton, & Ellison, 2013).

The analysis was also open to new evidence from the dataset, which challenged, extended or provided new knowledge on transition. The purpose of the data analysis was to enable modelling of the views, perceptions and feelings of the research participants regarding podcasts for transition. Thus the analysis focused on identifying respondents' experience of making the transition into HE and the perceived benefits of the podcasts in the transition process.

Results

We discuss the results under three themes:

- ❖ Usefulness of podcasts for transition
- ❖ Relevance of podcasts in the context of wider resources used for transition
- ❖ Students' experience of transition to HE

Usefulness of podcasts for transition

All students said that, to some degree, they had found information and advice in the podcasts useful, even while listening to these podcasts critically. The usefulness of podcasts for students' transition to HE can be split into three categories: the communication of new information and personal perspectives, the provision of advice regarding new positive behaviours, and reassurance regarding existing perspectives and behaviours.

Information from personal perspectives

Many interviewees detailed specific points of information that they had gleaned from the podcasts that they had not found elsewhere. Many suggested that such information was more likely to occur when it was being provided informally by those with direct experience of being a student on their course:

With lecturers, or with the information that module convenors give out, it's important information, but not necessarily things that you need to know. Whereas, when it's a student talking, it's only things that they've dealt with and if they feel the need to tell you then it's obviously important.

This was particularly prevalent in relation to the podcasts on second year modules, especially regarding course content (e.g. the fact that the module... "Genomes is about the Genome as a whole rather than genetics in general"), and the nature of practicals (in particular, that "some of them are six hours long"). The students suggested that they would use such information to orientate themselves going into their modules in the next year. In a similar retrospective vein regarding the podcast on examinations, one student suggested that:

If I had heard them [a Type B podcast on the exams] before I had my exams, it would have been quite useful because it sort of said how the exam was set out

Similarly, and looking to the future, some students also suggested that they had discovered, from podcasts, information about the work that they would have to do in their second and third years, their third year laboratory and library projects, and about the possibility of studying abroad (particularly information about funding available).

The information detailed above consisted of facts, and replicated some written material, i.e., existing sources of information. However, six out of the eight students who had listened to Type B suggested that the podcasts made new evaluative perspectives and opinions available to them in a way that the less personal and more formal written materials could not. They also recognised that a large amount of information provided in the podcasts was deeply subjective and students need to critically evaluate the information provided in Type B podcasts. As we mention later in the paper (in under *Semi-formal sources*) our involvement in recording and editing the podcasts, to some extent helps to mitigate lack of objectivity and the potential spread of incorrect information.

Advice on productive behaviours

Some interviewees also described specific advice that they had received from the podcasts. This took the form of suggestions for behaviours that the students on the podcasts believed would be productive and would aid others as they advanced through their studies. Students who had listened to podcasts considered that such advice was relevant because they were rooted in the experience of other students who have been through the same experience as themselves. These suggestions were particularly prevalent in relation to study skills and module selection. In some cases, the interviewees even announced that they would be following the advice provided by the podcasts:

This summer I'm definitely going to try and start [doing some] background reading, because obviously that's really important. It was mentioned in loads of the podcasts.

However, given that the interviews were conducted at the end of the first year, much of the advice discerned by the students interviewed was described not as suggestions of new actions that they would undertake but, rather, as suggestions of actions that they should have undertaken during their first year. This included, most notably, advice regarding the process of module selection, and, in particular, the suggestion that it may have been useful to contact peer mentors before making any final decisions.

Reassurance and reinforcement

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The podcasts' main benefits in terms of their reinforcement function was that they served to reduce uncertainty and the consequent anxiety regarding particular actions, behaviours and choices.

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The final category of the usefulness of podcasts was around the provision of support for students' existing knowledge and behaviours. Whilst some students criticised information in some of the podcasts especially those on the differences between the levels (year of study) and exams for merely stating the obvious, many of them described how the podcasts reinforced certain pieces of information, as well as the need, of which they were already aware, for certain courses of action:

I think, some of the points raised – things like doing extra reading – it does seem obvious, but I think just hearing people say it, kind of instils that it is vital.

I guess, I think that they just sort of reinforce what you have gathered from blackboard and from your tutors.

However, according to many interviewees, the podcasts' main benefits in terms of their reinforcement function was that they served to reduce uncertainty and the consequent anxiety regarding particular actions, behaviours and choices. In the case of the module selection, this meant that they helped to reassure the interviewees that they would enjoy the modules that they had chosen:

[The podcast about the Genomes module] says: 'if you're really interested in genes and if you're doing genetics, then it is really useful'. I'm interested in genes. It's quite good to know I've made the right choice.

Some interviewees also suggested that they were similarly reassured by the podcasts on other topics, most notably on examinations, which were a significant source of stress. These podcasts demonstrated to them that their concerns and difficulties were perfectly normal, which served to comfort them. As one interviewee said:

It's nice just to listen to that and to find that people have the same worries and the same problems that you did.

Many interviewees suggested that they would have used the opinions expressed in the podcasts to inform their own choices of second year modules, had they listened to them before selecting their modules. One interviewee, for example, said:

When choosing modules, as well, I think it is good to know other people's experiences [from the podcasts].

Such opinions and personal perspectives were found in all podcasts. For example, the podcast on the differences between the levels provided several perspectives regarding the actual difference between first and second years and the nature of laboratory work.

All the interviewees agreed that the podcasts contained useful information and advice. Certainly, two students even directly identified them as a solution to the lack of opportunities to learn from the experiential, informal knowledge of second and third year students:

There's no real way to speak to second years and third years apart from [by listening to] the podcasts.

So, if this [podcast] is available to us on blackboard we wouldn't need to go look for second years to ask them, because this is already available.

Indeed, the main source of legitimacy identified for the podcasts was the fact that the information contained within them was relayed by other students, from their own experiences:

They've been there, they've done that, so they can give you the proper advice.

I'd rather hear it [information] from students than – almost more than my tutor. The students have experienced what I have. They can understand my worries a bit more.

One student even expressed the opinion that only their peers would give fully honest advice, whereas personal tutors and module convenors may only communicate the official line.

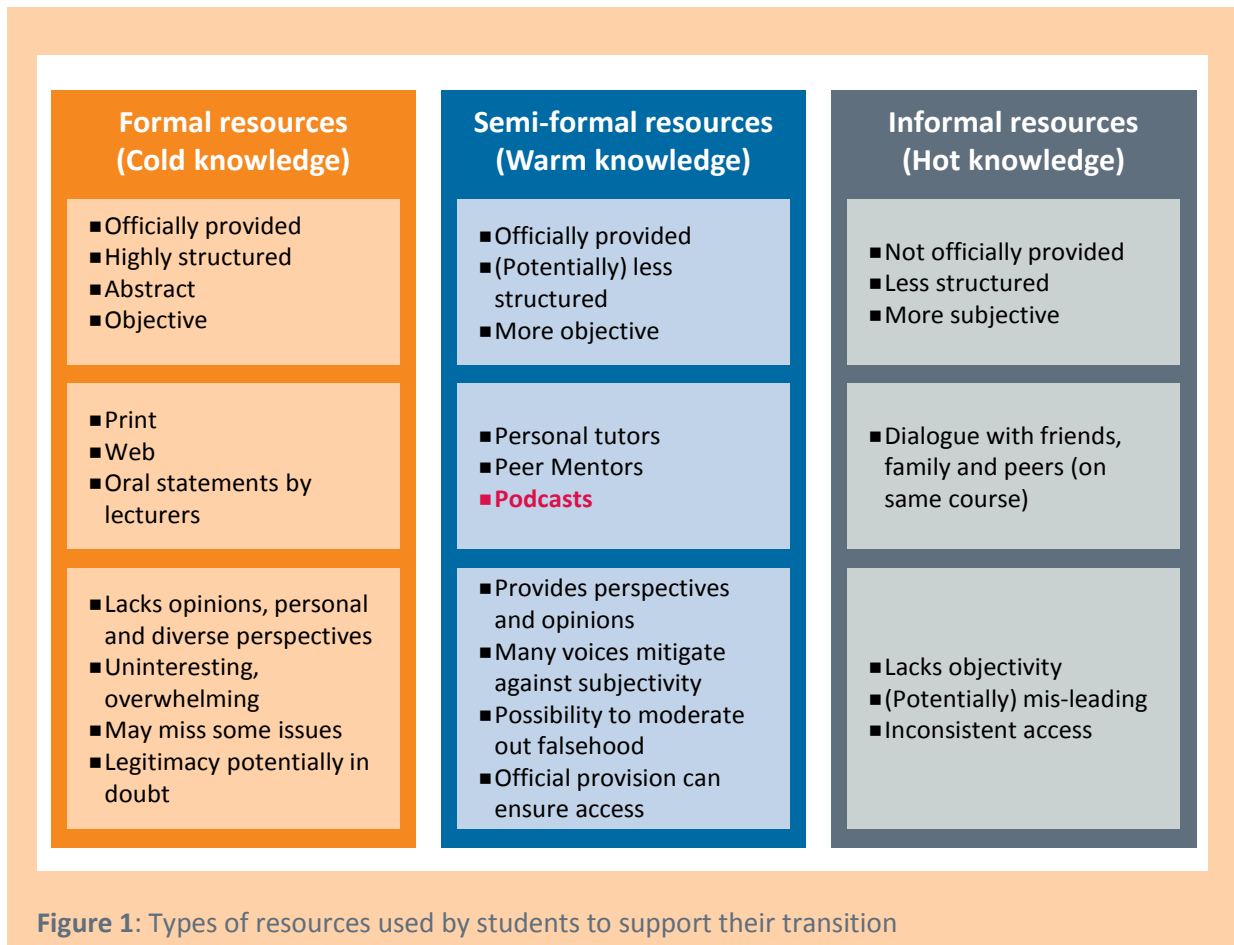
Relevance of podcasts in the context of wider resources used by students for their transition

To help them address the difficulties involved in transition, the students interviewed consulted a range of resources, which can be usefully sorted into three categories of: formal, informal, and semi-formal resources (Figure 1).

Formal resources

Formal resources are those that are officially produced and provided by the HE institution; these include highly structured, factual and abstract information. They provide what might be called 'cold knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998). These include the various printed materials used for information seeking, as well as module booklets used in selecting modules for the second year, alongside information taken from websites and the VLE, and formal information provided during lectures or on open days.

While all students reported using such resources, most of them felt that they were either poorly suited to aiding them in the various stages of their transition or not enough on their own. Whilst some students acknowledged that the written information available in print (module handbook) and online (the VLE) provided a good 'outline' of relevant 'facts'. Others criticised it for not containing 'enough description', and, most critically, not being able to provide 'opinions' and information derived from personal experience, which can highlight particularly salient elements of the first year



student experience. Some students even expressed displeasure at having to read large amounts of text containing dry, factual information.

As discussed in previously, many students found information in the podcasts that was relevant to them; such information was not available via the formal sources. One student even argued that the official and formal nature of such sources (which for them included lecturers and personal tutors) meant that they would only say ‘what they’re supposed to say’ and not what the student needs to hear. Finally, on a related point, many students expressed that while the formal sources of information were good for initial ‘factual stuff’ many decisions required the use of opinions and different perspectives that were simply not present in the formal resources.

Informal sources

One way in which students overcame these concerns about formal information was by using informal resources, such as family members or friends who had been through university, or, when they were in their first year at university, by consulting their peers. These resources are unofficial and accessed in an informal environment, and thus provide a source of ‘hot knowledge’, which is based on personal experience and opinion, rather than ‘cold’, abstract facts.

Although most students referred to advice and guidance received from family members before attending university, only one (who had family members in the medical profession) suggested that the family members had the knowledge required to provide the significant guidance needed in the

first year of studies. One student even explicitly stated that they felt that their family did not have the necessary experience to provide the advice required for the later stages of their transition.

Whilst such resources did, for many of the students, overcome the defects of the formal resources (such as the lack of diverse perspectives and opinions, and the insensitivity to particular circumstances), they were not without their own faults. First, since the information provided is often highly subjective, many students expressed a fear that they may not be the objective facts, or, at worst, that they may actually be told something that is simply not true, especially when talking to people who had little more experience than they themselves did (e.g. other students in their own year). Perhaps, even more problematically, in some cases the students stated that they did not actually know anyone with relevant HE experience. This was particularly the case for those who were amongst the first in their family to go to university. Informal was also particularly relevant with regard to the issues covered in the Type B podcasts (for example, module selection, examinations) that are specific to the biological sciences courses at the University of Leicester.

Semi-formal sources

One potential solution for many of these problems was to use semi-formal resources (a category which includes the podcasts produced in our project). These resources are officially provided by the university; examples include peer mentors and personal tutors. Students can access these resources on a personal level to hear insights drawn from relevant personal experience. These sources have the advantage that they do provide the opinions and experiential perspectives of hot knowledge, but also as they are officially provided, they can be monitored for quality and be made available to all students.

Our podcasts fit into this semi-formal category, potentially acting as a new source of information for students to support their transition. Students perceived these podcasts to be recordings of individuals sharing their insights and opinions on particular topics, moderated to prevent incorrect information from being spread, providing multiple subjective viewpoints, which was understood to mitigate the lack of objectivity (a point commonly raised by the students when commenting on the podcasts).

We suggested that the knowledge contained in podcasts and other semi-formal resources might be termed 'warm knowledge' as it lies somewhere between the 'cold' and 'hot' knowledge of the other two resources. It is the knowledge that is highly personal, but moderated through the selection of information and the editing process to ensure the accuracy and the balance of opinions expressed. It is the captured and edited 'hot' knowledge.

Semi-formal resources, too, are not without their pitfalls. Many students reported that they had not made consistent or widespread use of their peer mentors or personal tutors, and the quality of information provided by individuals fulfilling such roles was extremely variable. Indeed, some students reported that their personal tutors provided a large amount of personal advice, whereas others treated them as an extension of the formal resources and suggested that their personal tutors may not have had relevant experience and relied upon the abstract and dry formal information.

The podcasts can, potentially, avoid the problems that other semi-formal resources have faced. By being accessible from anywhere with a suitable internet connection, they are easier and quicker to access than personal tutors or peer mentors with whom meetings must be arranged or e-mails exchanged. They can also be used by students even before they choose to attend the university. Furthermore, since they are edited together from several interviews, incorrect information can easily be removed. Podcasts can contain many interesting and relevant viewpoints from different

contributors. They can also provide a level of consistency to everyone, which would be difficult to manage with the peer mentors or personal tutors.

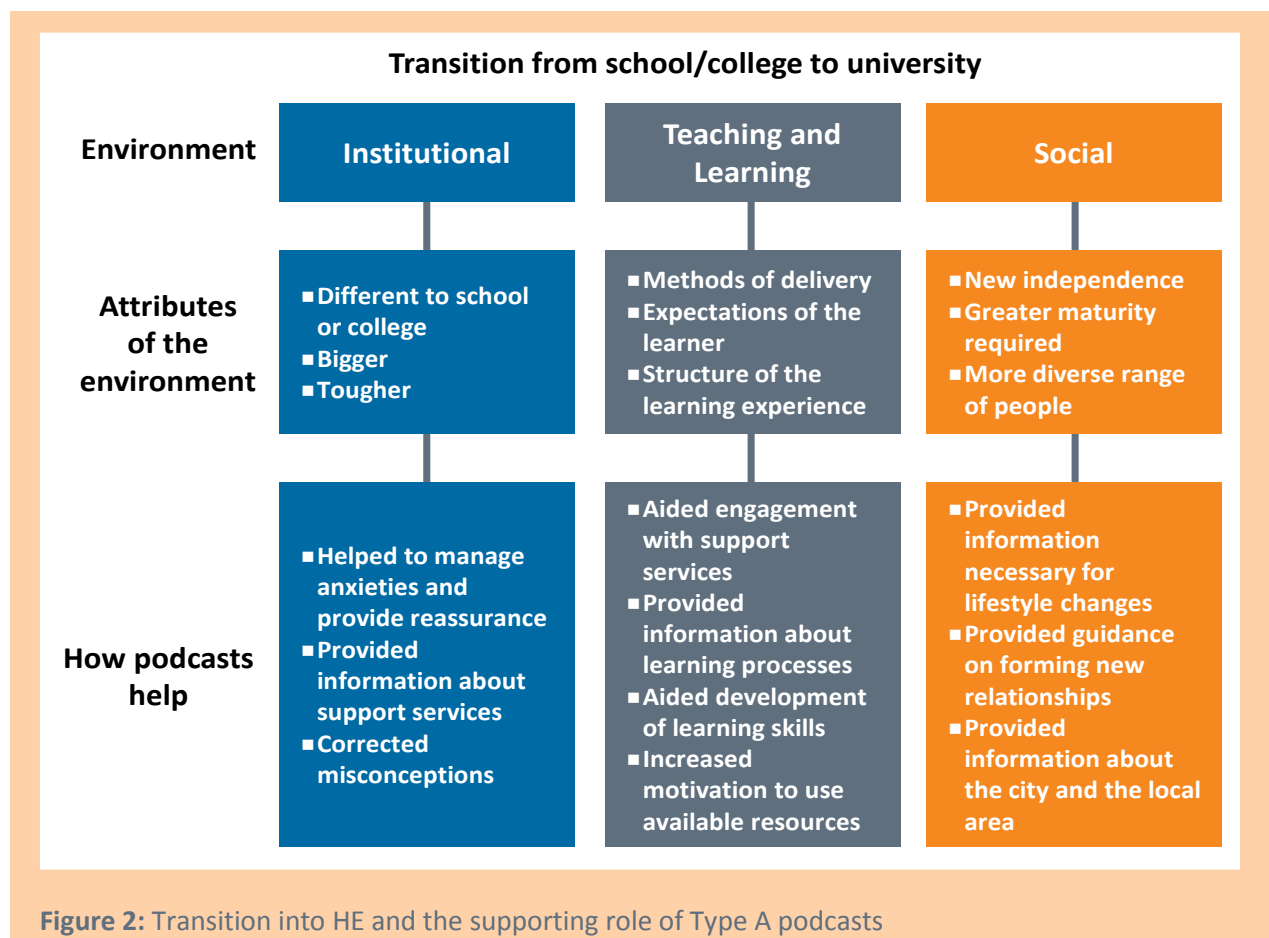
Thus, the podcasts can provide a useful addition to the other resources that are already used to assist with the transition process. All the students agreed that the podcasts could be useful to them as sources of opinions, perspectives and information that they could use whilst adapting to the higher education environment and making crucial decisions for their future.

Students' experience of transition to HE

The students who had listened to the podcasts described their transition from school / college and home into HE as occurring in three environments: institutional, teaching and learning, and social, each with unique attributes. Figure 2 summarises the attributes of these three environments together with how the Type A podcasts helped in this process.

First, for students, transition was moving from one level of the educational experience up to a new and higher level, HE. They compared their experience of being at school or college with that at university. For them, the class size, a non-uniformed and less regulated environment and tough demands made of them in their studies were notable differences in studying at university.

Second, students considered transition in terms of new ways of engaging with teaching and learning processes. Whereas at school or college they had worked in small groups and under close supervision and the guidance of class teachers, they reported that learning in university took many forms such as lectures, practical sessions, individual and group assignments, presentations, a lot of



reading and independent study. To them this made learning at university more demanding. They also experienced tighter deadlines.

Third, transition constituted a move into a new socio-cultural environment. They expressed transition in terms of leaving home, gaining independence, living away from loved ones, maturing and growing up, and being exposed to a variety of new people.

The analysis shows that students perceived transition as bringing 'discontinuity', that is, ending particular ways of behaving or doing things as they pertained in school or college.

Figure 2 shows the initial stages of students' transition from school or college to university and the potential of Type A podcasts to aid this process. As our data analysis showed, the Type B podcasts were useful for students' continued adaptation to the learning environment following early assessments and moving from first year to second year of their studies.

Discussion

The role of podcasts to support transition

From the analysis of our evidence outlined above, it is clear that our podcasts covered a range of issues with which the students interviewed had problems, both at the point of entering the university and during their first year of study. It is also clear that existing sources of information and guidance available to the students contained many limitations, leaving a gap that can be filled by different materials or programmes designed to aid students in their extended transition into higher education.

As shown above, the interviews demonstrated that students believe the 'warm' knowledge contained within the podcasts could serve a number of roles within their process of transition. 'Warm knowledge' is the kind of knowledge that is highly personal, but moderated through the selection of information and the editing process in order to ensure the accuracy and the balance of opinions expressed. 'Warm knowledge' in our podcasts included new information and perspectives; offering advice regarding positive behaviours; and the reinforcement of existing knowledge and behaviours; and the provision of emotional reassurance. In each case, the status of the podcasts as sources of 'warm knowledge' (captured and edited 'hot knowledge') and the fact that all the information in the podcasts was drawn from students' direct experience, meant that many students interviewed were more willing to integrate the information and advice into their process of transition.

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Student-contributed podcasts can fulfil a useful role when cultural capital is inadequate to support transition to HE, especially at the final phase of the transition process

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Overall, this suggests that student-contributed podcasts can fulfil a useful role when cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) is inadequate to support transition to HE, especially at the final phase of the transition process (see Fig. 5). Our interviews showed that even when students had access to cultural capital to aid their transition to HE (most of which came from at least one family member with experience of studying at university), such cultural capital was not useful to prepare them for studying in the specific environment of courses (in our case the subject of biological sciences at a particular university). Students' interviews showed that podcasts provided useful information to prepare them for this stage of transition.

Our interviews with students also revealed that potential sources of information and advice were neither ubiquitously available to all students, nor properly used by every student. The interviews revealed that many students could not identify readily accessible, reliable sources of informal knowledge and advice (which many of them suggested that they would find useful). Podcasts, incorporating knowledge and experience of students who had already made successful transition into HE, have the potential to fill this gap.

In this sense, with reference to the core concern of our project, the podcasts, particularly as sources of captured informal knowledge and experience, did help the students in their process of transition. In fact, as was shown above, the students attributed particular legitimacy to the podcasts on the very grounds that they were a relevant source that provided informal knowledge and the opinions of their peers who had already experienced similar situations.

The legitimacy placed upon the availability of such knowledge, which we call 'warm knowledge' in the podcasts was not in any way dimmed by the fact that academic and technical staff members were involved in the production process. None of the students interviewed said anything negative regarding the fact that the students' voices had been selected and edited. In fact, the only comments made were that the multiplicity of voices provided made the podcasts more relevant.

Of course, there can be a risk that such 'warm knowledge', being unofficial and based on subjective experiences, may contain distortions, and that, consequently, there is a risk that the podcasts will do more harm than good. However, the students treated that information with some caution; they acknowledged that much of it may be subjective and rooted in individual opinions, and placed those opinions in the spectrum of information available to them. In many ways this behaviour is similar to the category of 'Doubt' (as opposed to the more negative 'Suspicion' and more positive 'Acceptance') described by Ball & Vincent (1998) in their analysis of the use of information from 'the grapevine' when parents choose schools for their children. The behaviour in that category entails some reliance upon the information obtained from the grapevine, but recognition of its fallibility and the need to use it as 'one factor amongst many' (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 385). This is not surprising, and to be expected of intelligent students who are educated to critique information. In fact, it can be argued that one of the most important aspects of transition to HE is to develop this ability to evaluate and use information.

Once the podcasts have been developed and made available to students, their content remains static unless they are updated, which can be resource intensive. 'Hot knowledge' captured from a group of students at a particular point in time may not be updatable either. Some of our students however indicated that they wished that certain points made in podcasts could be elaborated and/or to have tutors' views on these points alongside students' opinions. Indeed, one student suggested that all the podcasts should have some commentary from lecturers or module convenors on them to provide more official and more formal information.

These objectives could be achieved by incorporating Web 2.0 tools to add comments (such as though a blog or a wiki) for podcasts. With the growing numbers of students using social software and networking tools, we can envisage the potential of blogs (Stirling, 2016), or peer mentor systems (Edirisingha, 2009) to capture and present 'warm knowledge' about topics that are relevant for students' transition to higher education. A comments facility can make podcasts more lively (rather than their current static state as a sound file to be downloaded or to be opened from a web browser), with on-going commentary by tutors on important issues and by other students who might elaborate some of the points made in the podcasts, although this might require external moderation.

Conclusions and recommendations

We examined how student-created podcasts can support HE entrants' transition from schools and colleges to university, and for those already in their first year, to make a successful transition within their programme of study. In the interviews, the students identified that all the issues addressed in the podcasts were ones with which they experienced difficulties; these issues constituted a significant and challenging part of their process of transition. Coping with leaving home and close networks of friends, making new friends, adjusting to a new life in university accommodation, managing finances and adjusting to studying as an undergraduate were particularly significant issues for them. For students in their first year, the selection of modules, examinations, study practices and whether or not to undertake a year abroad or in industry were also of concern. Students described these as areas in which they needed to make difficult decisions (in some cases, causing significant anxiety), and they lacked necessary information and guidance. Our study found that students believe that podcasts provide them with some benefits in their process of transition into HE. Findings from studies such as ours can be useful in developing institutional strategies to support transition.

We recognise a number of limitations of our research. One is that it was carried out in just one academic department and only a small number of students took part in the interviews. It would be useful to conduct a larger study representing different academic disciplines, from a wider cross section of HE institutions, to examine the applicability of our findings to the wider HE sector. Our research design and interview questions were not adequate to collect data to examine the specific aspects or features of podcasts that students felt were particularly valuable for them: for example, whether it is the nature of the content in podcasts (semi-formality of messages from other students) or podcasts as a distribution mechanism. It would be useful to carry out a further study with an appropriate design can examine these aspects. Further research can also include investigations into combining podcasting with comments written by students using blogs or wikis (Cane & Cashmore, 2016) that may help us to identify the value of a range of web tools for supporting transition.

We see student-contributed podcasts as a beneficial resource to support student transitions, especially where other potential sources of informal knowledge are absent or underused. This small-scale study has demonstrated that university students have a wealth of knowledge of, and experience in, a range of issues related to successful transition into higher education. Freely available and easy to use web-based technologies can be used to tap into their knowledge that can be useful for in-coming students. A lot can be achieved by working with students and drawing from their knowledge and experience.

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