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Background

Studies of undergraduates' satisfaction, academic performance and retention in 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 experiences.

Most interventions to support transition are based on institution-driven approaches such as courses on learning and study skills and in induction weeks when students can suffer from "information overload". The knowledge and experience of students who have already made the transition have rarely been exploited. Such knowledge is considered to be 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998), and can be identified as 'the socially embedded' knowledge prevailing in networks of friends, family, relatives and neighbours, and those who are generally considered as 'people like me'. Studies on HE preparation report that potential applicants consider 'hot knowledge' to be more trustworthy than communication through 'official' sources (Hutchings, 2003).

This study builds on from a previous GENIE project involving student-produced podcasts as learning tools (Cane & Cashmore, 2008), and is aimed at assessing whether student podcasts are a viable approach to easing transition into and within higher education.

The transition process

Information seeking	Inspection	Locating	Adjustment
Print based	Institution	Accommodation	Social
Web-based	Department	Support networks	Personal
Social sources			Learning

Before	During transition

Research method

This project utilises a qualitative research methodology. Twelve research participants were recruited for the initial study, out of which eight gave interviews after they had listened to the podcasts. The interviews were aimed at answering two key questions:

- What processes are involved in making transition into Higher Education from both student and institutional perspectives?
- What is the expected impact of podcast on transition into Higher Education?

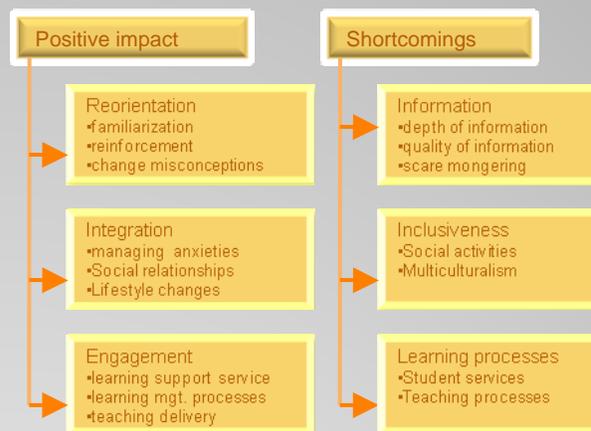
Data analysis was carried out using cognitive mapping methodology. Cognitive mapping supports a subjective view of knowledge in which individual beliefs, assertions, attitudes and values are considered valid and hence provide evidence for research (Ackermann, Eden, and Cropper, 2004). The analysis thus focused on generating individual maps of participants' experience of making transition into HE and the perceived benefits of the podcasts in the transition process. Such individually generated maps helped to identify emerging patterns of similarity and differences of the transition experience and to categorize these patterns in relation to relevant literature on transition. Thus the data analysis was guided both by relevant themes obtained from the literature as well as by evidence that emerged dynamically from the dataset noting linkages between elements of the data.

Podcast Production

Current biological sciences undergraduate and postgraduate students were recruited into the project. Students discussed a series of predefined topics relevant to students starting university. Topics included differences between school and university, managing finances, making friends, and coping with living away from home. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder.

Recordings were edited using Audacity, to produce the finished podcasts on individual topics, each featuring the voices of several students. Further recordings have also been made on topics relevant to students during their courses, for example on preparing for exams, and choosing modules.

Impact of podcasts



Conclusions

Initial evidence from our ongoing research indicates that Podcasts can be a valuable approach to support student transition. Our preliminary findings show that benefits can be conceptualised in four main ways; to support learning, to support social integration, to manage the affective dimension of transition, and to communicate information. Limitations of the approach include balancing the information content and the length of the recordings, and publicising the podcasts and encouraging listening.

References

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