Getting the Message: supporting students' transition from Higher National to degree level study and the role of mobile technologies

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Abstract: In this paper, we explore roles that mobile technologies can play in supporting students' transition to second and third year of university degree study, specifically along articulation routes from completing a Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND) at college. Articulating students face particular challenges associated with, typically, adjusting to the demands of moving up a level in their academic studies, acclimatising to an unfamiliar academic culture, and integrating into an existing cohort of students. Message of Support, a project funded by the Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub (ELRAH), developed a range of SMS, podcasts, and DVD resources, drawing on the voice and experience of existing students, in order to support new students and staff in their respective parts in the articulation journey. Through a process of action research, it was found that such resources can aid the transition process by offering timely contact, reassurance, and information to students as well as valuable development materials for staff. Responses to the challenges of using mobile technologies as support mechanisms for articulating students were identified. Additionally, other areas of transitional support provision outwith tertiary education were identified. The Message of Support project is sharing lessons learned and helping to inform good practice in this context.

Keywords: articulation; student support; SMS; mobile technologies; podcast; ELRAH

1. Introduction

The creation of articulation pathways into university has become a strategic priority for many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), representing a key element of the development of flexible access to Scottish higher education (Scottish Funding Council, 2011). Articulation describes a particular route through higher education by which an initial qualification (in Scotland, usually HNC or HND qualifications at Scottish Curriculum Quality Framework (SCQF) levels 7 and 8 respectively ([SCQF 2009]) gains a student access to a university degree with advanced standing, directly into second or third year. Such progression often reflects a formal agreement or partnership between institutions (Gallacher 2006). A successful articulation route relies not only on careful curricular alignment between the courses in the two institutions, but also depends upon staff at both ends of the articulation journey ensuring that students are as well prepared as possible to respond to the academic and personal challenges that await them upon arrival at university and during their studies (MacAskill 2010). This type of access route to higher education supports the Scottish Government's commitment to providing efficient, flexible learner journeys (Scottish Government, 2011).

This paper explores the role of mobile technologies in helping to address some of the challenges faced by articulating students. The Message of Support project, funded by the Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub [ELRAH] developed podcasts, SMS texts and a DVD to provide point-of-need support for articulating students from Scottish colleges, and professional development for academic staff at Edinburgh Napier University. ELRAH is one of six regional articulation hubs in Scotland funded by the Scottish Funding Council (Scottish Funding Council, 2008). ELRAH's work promotes the creation and development of articulation routes between college and university and supports the transition of students into degree level study. The hub comprises several university and college partners located in its regional area (see www.elrah.ac.uk/Elrah.htm). In this way, although the Message of Support project was primarily focussed on students articulating to degree programmes Edinburgh Napier University, students articulating to degrees at Heriot-Watt, and Queen Margaret Universities also fell within its remit.

In this paper we describe how interviews with students who had made successful articulation journeys to Edinburgh Napier University were used to create a series of podcasts for new students and a DVD resource for professional development for academic staff. We also discuss our experience of using SMS texts to encourage students to engage with various strands of academic support provision. For many students, the first few weeks in a new University environment can result in a severe loss of

confidence (Christie et al 2008) which may result in withdrawal from their programme. Our experience at Edinburgh Napier confirms that students welcome advice and encouragement from other students in whose footsteps they follow. They recognize the value of structured support such as academic skills workshops, but also feel strongly about the contribution of individual academic staff to restoring and building their confidence and helping them to adjust to the unfamiliar academic and social demands of university life. Our project confirmed that the deployment of a range of different technologies at different stages in the articulation journey and amongst the different partners in the articulation process can enhance a student's experience of joining a degree programme as a direct entrant. Other areas of transitional support provision outwith tertiary education were also identified, and lessons learned from the Message of Support project are already helping to inform good practice in online support provision in other contexts.

2. Background and context

2.1 Supporting student transitions to university study

New university students of all kinds face challenges as they make the transition to university study (Lowe and Cook 2003). For Scottish undergraduates, the traditional 'first year' (SCQF Level 7) is a period during which students build social networks, familiarise themselves with institutional systems and learn how to learn as a university student (Tait and Godfrey 2001). Research has shown that direct entry students articulating to year 2 or year 3 (SCQF Level 8 or 9) face particular challenges. These include integration into a cohort of students who have already learned together for one or two years, the step up to a more advanced level of study, and acclimatisation to a different academic culture. Cree et al (2009) describe a picture of 'dislocation and loss' amongst students struggling to adjust to degree study. Barron and d'Annunzio-Green (2009) point to a catch-up phase in which students must not only adjust to these differences but also to familiarise themselves with the one or two previous years of learning undertaken by their peers; they highlight the importance of maintaining student support and building students' academic self-confidence during the early months of their degree study. However, since articulating students progress from an HNC or HND, their academic career begins long before they join the university, and thus developing academic skills and confidence must also begin well before that point (MacAskill 2010). Pike and Harrison (2011) emphasise the importance of a 'smooth' transition, to which good communication between institutional partners is essential. Continuity of support between levels is thus one of the keys to successful transition.

Amongst the difficulties identified by articulating students in this research was lack of awareness of what to expect from university study. New students attach considerable value to hearing from previous articulating students about their experiences (MacAskill 2010; Kivlichan and Chirnside 2011). This is particularly relevant for students from widening participation groups, who may often be the first generation of their family to go to university and thus lack the benefit of informally shared knowledge about university (Cree et al, 2006). This can act as a barrier to first generation students entering higher education (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009) and thus make transition into later years of study even more challenging. Further, in Scotland, students from widening participation backgrounds, which often includes students articulating from college, are more likely to live at home or locally and continue with their familiar lifestyle. Christie et al (2005) argue that the normative conception of a student as a middle-class school-leaver moving away from home for the first time is no longer adequate. They found that students are now forging new pathways and identities in Higher Education and expect their institutions to respond. These students, less closely knit within the university environment than the traditional student ideal, acutely felt the disadvantage of not benefiting from 'the more informal, peer-generated knowledge about how things work and can be made to work more advantageously' (Christie et al, 2005: 24). Further, Pike and Harrison (2011) suggest that raising awareness among new direct entrants that their concerns are shared by peers could reduce feelings of isolation.

Research points to the key role played by academic staff in supporting the student transition. This indicates a need for staff development so that academic staff are aware of articulating students in their classes and are equipped to address their needs. Bingham and O'Hara (2007) found that students felt some of their Higher Education (HE) lecturers were unaware of the prior learning they had experienced; Pike and Harrison (2011) recommend that university teaching teams should be aware of new direct entrants in their classes and be prepared to respond to their needs.

2.2 Institutional context

At Edinburgh Napier University, student feedback has indicated a similar range of challenges associated with direct entry to university. The University operates an annual survey, Students Calling Students, mid-way through the first trimester, in which trained students telephone new students to ask them informally about their experience of settling in. Their target group includes direct entry students as well as first years. While the majority of direct entry students settle in well to university in the first trimester, Students Calling Students in 2010/11 found that direct entrants were much more (46%) likely to have experienced difficulties with the transition to university than year one students (18%) (Kivlichan and Chirnside 2011). In particular, issues were encountered with use of IT systems, challenges with particular modules, producing lab reports, time management, and personal or financial matters. When asked what further help the university could have provided, responses included more information provided while students were still at college (e.g. timetables, course content, and explanations of the amount of work required), examples of assignments, and hearing from existing direct entry students about their experiences (Kivlichan and Chirnside 2011: 14).

In the 2011/12 wave of the initiative, although Students Calling Students found fewer (30%) of direct entrants reporting difficulties, the findings reinforced the challenges students were experiencing with finance, time management, and learning about the university's systems (Kivlichan and Johnston, 2011). In comparison to first years, however, direct entrants were still more likely to be reporting difficulties. In the 2011/12 wave, Students Calling Students also asked students about their attendance or non-attendance at additional classes or services such as academic skills workshops. The most popular reason for non-attendance at such activities was reported as lack of time (21%) followed by employment commitments (15%) (Kivlichan and Johnston, 2011). Mobile technology initiatives like the Message of Support project, therefore, have a key role to play in addressing the need for additional transition support during the crucial early weeks of the students' first trimester. For students with limited opportunities to access face-to-face support offered on campus, mobile technology-mediated support provision allows these students to access support as and when they need it and have time to do so.

Research by Howieson and Croxford (2011) into the experience of direct entry students across four universities (Edinburgh Napier, Heriot-Watt, Queen Margaret and Stirling) in the ELRAH partnership supports these findings. After three months of degree study, direct entry students to year two or three were less likely (47%) to feel they had been very or quite well prepared for their course than college students entering year one (72%). Direct entrants felt that advance preparation before starting university was crucial, including awareness raising about available support, the chance to experience aspects of degree study, and opportunities for integration with existing students. Many students also considered online information and materials to be valuable resources (Howieson and Croxford 2011) and Scottish Higher Education institutions continue to explore ways of making pre-entry and induction online resources and materials as widely accessible as possible. For example, In May 2011, Edinburgh Napier University launched SPOCE-UKi which is a pre-entry induction resource designed specifically for direct entry students, in which students work through interactive units relating to what they should expect from degree study, and to key study skills. SPICE-UK was modelled on the pilot, SPICE, originally developed by Foster (2011) and adapted for different student groups including international, direct entry, and postgraduate students. Complementing web-based resources therefore, mobile technology becomes a crucial tool in enabling models of transitional support to be congruent and consistently available to students passing to a new stage of their education.

2.3 Role of mobile technology in student support

The functionality of mobile devices is well documented. They are portable, versatile, easy to use, wireless and can integrate and synchronise with a variety of other technology platforms. These factors contribute to their widespread popularity and the extent to which they are regarded as indispensable (Chai et al: 2007). Song (2011) reminds us that it is not the functionality of the technology alone which makes mobile technology such a powerful tool for learning, but rather the abilities of the learner to take action in certain environments and to recognize how the resources or interactions mediated by mobile technologies may be able to shape their learning. Traxler and Kukulska-Hulme (2005: 1) acknowledge the potential for mobile learning to address the needs of 'the new constituency of learners', given the flexibility and near ubiquity of mobile technologies. Data from a recent Edinburgh Napier survey of student usage of mobile technologies (2010, unpublished) confirms this; 99.5% of our survey respondents own a mobile phone/device. Recent mobile student

support pilot studies in universities and colleges reveal three main consistent themes; first, students value the use of mobile technologies in their interactions with the University (Riordan and Traxler 2005,); secondly they feel socially connected by these interactions (Lunsford 2010; Mentor 2011) and thirdly, institutional strategies for mobile student support are likely to feature different mobile devices and materials (Lunsford 2010).

Riordan and Traxler (2005) highlight technical and pedagogical issues in the effective and appropriate use of SMS texting. Student acceptance and engagement is enhanced where SMS interventions are short, personalised and focussed (Riordan and Traxler 2005). Elsewhere, SMS student-support initiatives are motivated by differing administrative and pedagogical priorities. The UK Council for International Student Affairs (http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/case_studies_support.php) provides collection of best practice case studies which describe projects where podcasts and SMS are used to provide support for international students. For example, the Loughborough College initiative is designed to assist its International Office to keep touch with students, on the other hand Sheffield Hallam's initiative responds to international student demand for support materials such as podcasts, maps and web resources on arrival in the UK. While these case studies provide examples of mobile student support practice, the students' experiences of these initiatives are not described in any detail.

Mentor (2011) explores the potential for SMS texts to offer a sense of social connectedness to students experiencing isolation from their college community. Although connections between the perception of emotional well-being and improved academic performance still require further exploration (Mentor 2011), Tinto's seminal model of student integration (1975) continues to provide a frame of reference for understanding the connections between social interaction, integration with academic systems and student retention. Models of student retention and engagement have evolved since then (Tinto 2007) to reflect a broader range of institutional contexts and student circumstances including online and distance learning (Rovai 2002), but the concept of involvement, (or engagement) remains a key element for almost all mobile technology-mediated student support initiatives.

The benefits of mobile accessible materials for enhancing social connectedness for distance learning students at the Open University (OU) (Lunsford 2010) appears to be broadly consistent with Mentor's (2011) findings. The OU investigation comprised several strands of activity each making different use of mobile technologies and learning materials. Lunsford (2010) observes the important affective impact of the interactions mediated by mobile technologies, where students report feeling more connected and involved with the organisation as a result. An important outcome of that project is a 'model of student support using handheld technologies' (Lunsford 2010). This model offers a flexible but coherent framework recognizing that different parts of the organisation will make use of mobile technologies in different ways. A particular mobile device may be more useable in one context than in another (Kukulska-Hulme 2005).

2.4 Action research

A commitment to improvement is of paramount importance in any action research project (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). Despite the differences amongst the various typologies of action research offered in the literature, most share a common way of thinking about the role of the researcher as practitioner (Cohen 2000), the value of collaboration in offering differing perspectives (Reil 2011), the cyclical and systematic nature of enquiry that is undertaken in the name of action research (Norton 2009) and the inherent contribution that transparent reflection makes to every part of the research and its outcomes (McNiff and Whitehead 2010).

3. Methodology

Messages of Support explored the potential of mobile technologies to improve the transition experience of students coming to university as direct entrants from Scotland's colleges. Messages of support, information and encouragement were embedded in a suite of podcasts and in a timeline of SMS texts messages. The target audience for podcasts and SMS were students in Lothians, Fife and Borders colleges, as well as students just arrived at Edinburgh Napier University. Locating the podcasts within the University student portal would have made them inaccessible to college students given the need for a matriculation identity. As a result, we hosted the podcasts on Podbean, an open-access podcast hosting service, and distributed the text messages from an SMS server based in Edinburgh Napier University, accessible online from various college locations. Action research, carried out by practitioners on their own practice, presented a strong methodological framework with

which to underpin our collaborative exploration of the potential benefits of mobile accessible materials for transition support. We established a project team of practitioners from colleges and University and although the membership of the team varied as the project developed, the mixture of expertise and professional focus ensured that at every stage the reflective process was collaborative and participative. Norton's (2009) five-step action research process provided the most useful way of sharing the practicalities of our different but related reflective cycles of activity. We started by producing a suite of podcasts for students (Table 1) and generating a timeline of SMS texts (Table 2,) then out of the experience of Reflective Cycles 1 & 2 we produced a DVD for staff (Table 3).

Table 1: Reflective cycle 1 (podcasts)

Step 1	Identifying the issue	Research provided evidence of the challenges that students face joining university as direct entrants from college.
Step 2	Thinking of ways to tackle the issue	Interest in mobile technologies and the rise of mobile learning initiatives across the university and the HE sector provided a catalyst to develop a series of podcasts for direct entrants. A project team of academics and student support staff in colleges and the university established the podcast topics (see Figure 1), which complemented other existing university student support podcasts. This project sought to recognize the value of student voice in providing reassurance and authentic material for the podcasts.
Step 3	Doing it	Students who had joined second or third year of undergraduate degree programmes were interviewed. The interview questions were informed by Tinto's model of student integration (1975). We asked questions about our interviewees' experience of academic integration during their first trimester (whether or not they were enjoying their subject and coping with academic assignments) and in relation to social integration (whether or not they had friends and the nature and extent of the contacts that they had with university staff). We asked them what advice they would give to students who would follow them from college to university. Student interviews were recorded, edited and developed into a suite of podcasts. Podbean site (http://college2uni.podbean.com) was developed and podcasts were launched on a time-released basis. Publicity posters helped to publicize the initiative.
Step 4	Evaluating it	We counted the number of visits to the site, and the number of 'hits' on each of the podcasts. Each podcast has an online 'comments' form on which participants were invited to submit feedback or to suggest other podcasts. Invitation to participate in interviews or focus group discussions Informal comment and feedback from members of the project team
Step 5	Modifying practice	We address this in more detail in the Discussion. There is no doubt that when using open access platforms such as Podbean, it is essential for evaluation purposes to find ways of making contact with the students who are likely to be accessing the site.

Table 2: Reflective cycle 2 (SMS texts)

Step 1	Identifying the issue	As for podcasts in Table 1.
Step 2	Thinking of ways to tackle the issue	As part of other projects, ELRAH staff produced a timeline of interventions to facilitate successful articulation. A series of SMS text messages could be deployed across the span of that timeline, from the process of application to university until the end of the first university trimester. The working group drew upon the expertise of the University's Lead IT Developer. The University's SMS interface system enables bulk text messages to be sent directly to individual students' personal mobile numbers. The SMS system is web-enabled, and access is thus not restricted to the university campus. This enables both college and university staff to operate the system to reach students at all stages.

Step 3	Doing it	A series of SMS text messages was designed according to the timeline described in Step 2. The SMS messages aimed to support students' sense of belonging to the university and to reinforce their induction programme with reminders of activities such as academic skills workshops or where to find advice on exam techniques. Students in the target group at college or direct entrants to university were invited to register by sending a text message to the SMS system. Students would receive no more than 2 SMS messages each month, between July and December. The initiative has run twice, in 2010/11 and 2011/12. Each year, between 7-11 messages were issued between July and December, variously targeted to students while at college, and then after matriculation to university
Step 4	Evaluating it	Analysing the number and range of students taking part in the initiative. Evaluations from project team on the method and management of the SMS interface.
Step 5	Modifying practice	We explain in the discussion how we are adapting our approach for the coming academic session 2012/13.

Table 3: Reflective cycle 3 (DVD)

Step 1	Identifying the issue	The first round of interviews (for the podcasts) told us that some articulating students reported serious difficulties during their first year as direct entrants, including social isolation and problems with assimilating the HE academic culture.
Step 2	Thinking of ways to tackle the issue	We recognized that the student narratives could make a powerful impact on academic staff. A DVD was selected as a suitable format for a professional development resource. We anticipated that the material on the DVD was likely to be sensitive and not appropriate for student use, so in order to limit access, the resource has not been web-enabled.
Step 3	Doing it	Both student and staff accounts were used in order to maximise the impact of the DVD. We re-interviewed and filmed students from the podcast interviews. We also interviewed one new member of academic staff who had valuable experience of working with groups of students that included a significant proportion of direct entrants. The DVD has been used for the purpose of Academic Induction and as a resource for CPD for staff in the university.
Step 4	Evaluating it	Feedback from participants at Academic Induction and from members of the project team
Step 5	Modifying practice	Use of the DVD with new groups of staff and with programme teams will be monitored and re-evaluated throughout the forthcoming academic session. We explore this further in the discussion.

4. Results

The evaluation of each of the three cycles of activity represented the most challenging aspect of our project. The table below takes Step 4 (Evaluating it) from each of the reflective cycles documented above and illustrates the results associated with each of the evaluation methods.

Table 4: Results for reflective cycle 1 (podcasts)

Evaluating it	Results
Counting visits to the site and hits on each podcast	Between January and July 2011 the College2uni Podbean site (http://college2uni.podbean.com/) received 1618 visits. The number of 'hits' on the podcasts vary from the least popular (Staying on for Honours) with 13 hits and the most popular (Personal Development Tutor [PDT]) with 337 hits.
Comments forms for each podcast	None were completed.
Invitation to participate in interviews or focus groups to discuss their experience of the podcasts or to provide feedback by way of email.	In May an email was issued to all 2nd and 3rd year students who came to Edinburgh Napier University from College in 2010, inviting them to offer feedback about their experience of the 'college2uni' podcasts. We received no responses.

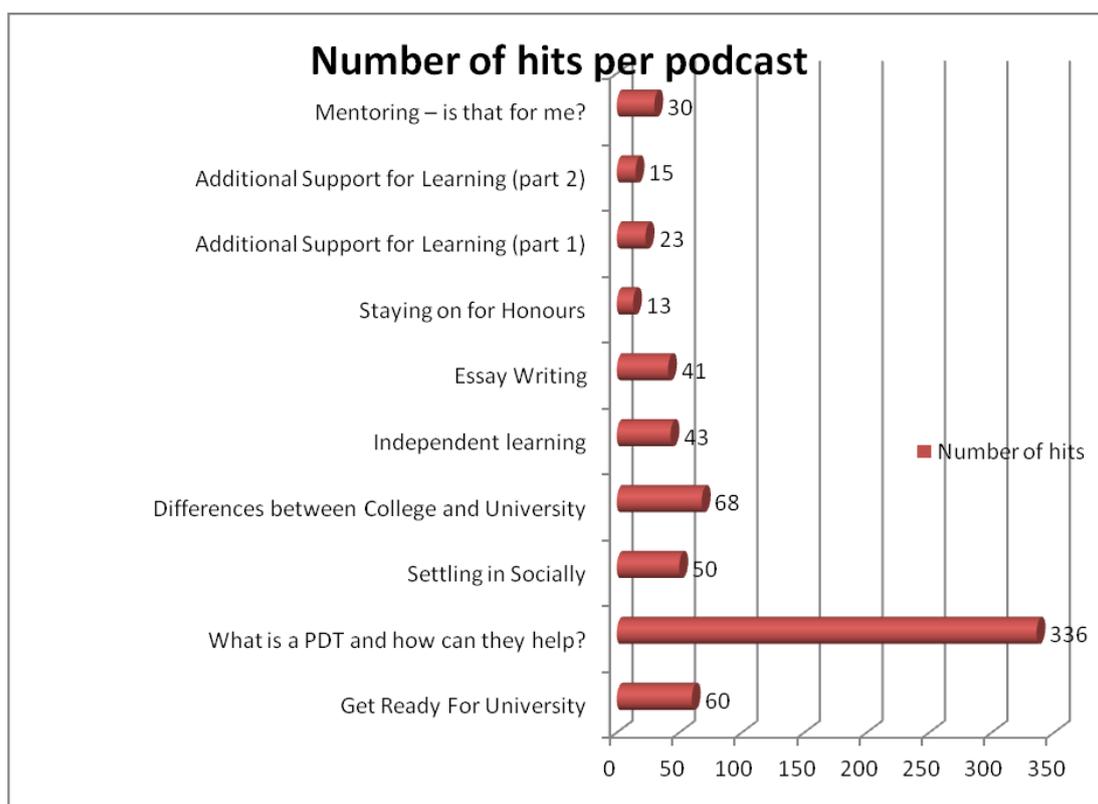| Evaluating it	Results
Feedback from articulation support staff and from others working in Scotland's colleges	Three articulation support advisors who had actively used the podcasts responded to the invitation to provide feedback. A consistent theme emerges from their responses around the importance attached by students to the student-voice perspective of the podcasts: 'I think it's beneficial to hear this information first hand, as in my experience students will *listen* to staff, but tend to *believe* other students.' The podcasts were well-received by staff working in central support roles in ELRAH partner colleges. We received requests from all of the colleges for the publicity posters and several colleges sought permission to upload the podcasts on their own student portals.

Figure 1: Number of hits per podcast

Table 5: Results for reflective cycle 2 (SMS)

Evaluating it	Results
Participants	2010/11 9 students registered with the SMS system. Of these, 3 articulated to Edinburgh Napier (plus 1 to year one), 1 to Heriot-Watt, and 2 to an Edinburgh Napier degree in Carnegie College. The remaining 2 did not go on to university. This uptake rate was disappointingly low, and participation was more actively promoted in following year. The range of student destinations, however, demonstrated the system's potential to reach a diverse and dispersed student population. A closing message requesting feedback on the messages elicited no responses. 2011/12 43 students were registered with the SMS system. Of these, 31 articulated to Edinburgh Napier, 5 to Heriot-Watt, and 7 to Queen Margaret. This uptake represented an improvement on the previous year and will be maintained in the third year of this project strand. A closing message requesting feedback on the messages elicited no responses.
Administration	2010/11 Participation relied on students contacting the SMS system. The following year we tried a different method. 2011/12 Student mobile numbers were collected, with their permission for use for Message of Support, at a range of contact opportunities such as Get Set for University workshops which take place before the end of the college term.

Evaluating it	Results
Interface	Administrators found the interface to be straightforward to use. It allowed students to be variously grouped (e.g. by year of study, college of origin, university, or university course) for ease of targeting messages.

Table 6: Results for reflective cycle 3 (DVD)

Evaluating it	Results
Feedback from academic induction	Feedback from induction participants was positive. Comments were made about the powerful impact of hearing actual student stories. Other participants had not previously considered their role in supporting direct entry students prior to viewing the DVD.

5. Discussion

5.1 Podcasts

Figure 1 displays the distribution of hits on each podcast. One podcast, 'What is a PDT?', received nearly 5 times as many hits as the next most popular. We speculate this may have been caused by the acronym and the podcast's title being posed in the form of a question. If so, this may point to the importance of demystifying jargon such as PDT (personal development tutor). The other podcasts average 38 hits. Allowing for the uncertainty over how many users were students, this may suggest the need of more active and directed promotion of the podcasts to the target group in the future.

As noted in Table 4, the lack of qualitative data from students means we are unable to analyse how and why students (if indeed they were students) accessed the podcasts, whether or not they subscribed to the whole series, why there was such a variation in the number of hits on each podcast (from 13 to 337), nor, perhaps most importantly, how valuable they found the form and content of the series. We were pleased to support colleges to host the podcasts within their own institutional virtual environments. However, given the dispersed location of the podcasts across various student portals, and the anonymity of the College2uni podbean site users, evaluating the usage and value of the podcast series became unachievable.

5.2 SMS

The SMS project was successful in testing the bulk mailing system, which its administrators found reliable and straightforward to use.
In 2010/11, student recruitment to the SMS system proved a challenge. Although 6 of the 9 students participating in the initiative progressed to enrol as undergraduates at Edinburgh Napier University, the sample size was too small to draw any conclusions about its impact. Students were required to register their mobile number by sending a text message to the system, but very few students actually took this step despite having expressed interest in taking part. As a result, opportunities to assess the impact of the SMS support in 2010/11 were limited.

Consequently, in 2011/12, mobile phone numbers were collected in advance for entry by the system's administrator. Student mobile numbers were collected, with their permission for use for Message of Support, at a range of opportunities such as visits to the universities and Get Set for University workshops which take place before the end of the college term. The effect of this change was immediately evident. Although some students understandably chose to withhold their number, or in the event did not gain a place or choose to matriculate onto their intended course, in total 43 students at QMU, HW, and Edinburgh Napier were registered. This indicates that the success of this strand of the project is dependent not on the technology but on its management.

Nevertheless, the project team intended to increase this number next year to around 50 students. Due to the low uptake in the first two years, there is enough credit left in the system as originally budgeted by the project for at least a third further year, depending on student uptake. At this stage, it becomes essential to evaluate the impact of the SMS strand of the project to determine whether continued investment in it is worthwhile.

In 2010/11 and 2011/12, evaluating the SMS strand posed a challenge. Students were contacted by text message and by email, and offered the opportunity to give feedback by text message, phone or email. In 2011/12, feedback questions were sent by email to facilitate easy response, and purposely kept simple:
Did you like it?

Should we keep doing it?
What should we do differently?

Nevertheless, students did not respond to these requests, suggesting that different ways of assessing impact and collecting feedback may be required for certain mobile technologies. In 2012/13, the project team will explore other methods, including promoting student engagement further by beginning the cycle of messages earlier, encouraging participation in other activities such as social networking, and seeking evaluation on an individual as well as a group level, including by phone.

5.3 DVD

We expected to make regular use of the DVD at academic induction, but the small numbers of new academic staff and the lack of induction events mitigated against this. However, at the start of academic session 2012/13 we expect to respond to requests from programme teams who will be using the resource in preparation for the new intake of direct entrants in September 2012. This should provide us with ongoing evaluation data.

6. Cascading the Messages of Support approach

While we are unable to understand the exact nature or the intricacies of use relating to the Messages of Support podcasts, nor to analyse what determined the popularity of some of the podcasts over others, the feedback received by some of the ELRAH Articulation Support Advisers has been encouraging. Furthermore, the ethos of the podcasts in providing themed guidance to direct entrant students at key points during their transition into university, using the voices of students who have already successfully made the transition, has begun to attract interest within other areas of transitional support provision.

One potentially very promising development relates to the work of charities and other third sector agencies that provide various forms of service-user support. Within recent explorations of opportunities to share experience of providing online student support between Edinburgh Napier University and third sector organisations in central Scotland, the Messages of Support approach has been widely demonstrated and found to be particularly relevant to the provision of timely interventions for service users at various stages of drug and alcohol recovery. The idea here is that service users at later stages of the recovery process could help produce podcasts that would provide encouragement and peer support to those at earlier stages in their recovery journey. The podcasts would complement other forms of support available in face-to-face meetings while also improving outreach for agencies that support service-users who are distributed across wide catchment areas.

Initial explorations of the above with a number of agencies in central Scotland has led to one of the authors, and colleagues, to secure a grant to implement and evaluate the use of online social media and other digital tools in order to support the work of a major Scottish charity in its work with service-users at potential risk of suicide. At the time of writing, the initial stages of this project are well underway, and the Messages of Support project is providing a key reference point and template for a series of podcasts to be created collaboratively by the charity and its service-user group.

Within Edinburgh Napier, the Messages of Support project is also providing a valuable model currently being explored within the context of the fully online MSc Blended and Online Education programme, and other online modules and courses. The aim is to provide 'point of time' guidance for online students at key stages of undertaking major individual projects. The intention here is to provide an indication of where students should be at on a week-by-week basis, so as to increase encouragement and motivation, and provide an equivalence to the kind of tutor and peer support for independent projects that is more readily available formally and informally in campus-based contexts.

Parts of the podcast series were also adapted for use as audio resources in an Edinburgh Napier overseas programme. On a top-up degree in nursing for students based in Singapore, student feedback had indicated that the formal induction, although thorough and detailed, had not answered all their questions and concerns. Students had received a certain quantity of paper information in their programme handbook, and had been guided through the available online resources, but were still left unsure about how university would differ from their previous educational experiences and how they were expected to engage with university study. The 'Get ready for University', 'Difference between college and University', and 'Independent Learning' audio files were embedded in WebCT (Edinburgh

Napier's VLE) to enable students to hear the stories of real students and gain some insight into the university experience from a student point of view. The relevance of the podcasts to other student groups, including those studying in other countries, demonstrates the adaptability and versatility of mobile technology-mediated resources in supporting student transitions in a variety of situations.

Message of Support has shown itself to be versatile on two levels. Both the concept behind Message of Support, and the products themselves, proved to be reusable and readily transferable to new contexts.

7. Conclusions

In the Message of Support project, the use of podcasts made the voice and experience of existing students readily and widely available online to all, circumventing the restrictions of access often associated with institutional logins. The podcasts and SMS messages can also promote a sense of belonging and connectivity to the institution, as well as raising awareness of key topics known to present challenges to students not only within ELRAH regional partners but also nationally and internationally. Student feedback has highlighted the importance of staff awareness of the articulating student experience, and the DVD promotes a wider understanding amongst academic staff of the needs of this student group. We are also encouraged by the wider value that the Messages of Support project is being seen to have in other areas of online support for individuals undertaking different kinds of transitional journey, as well as in other educational contexts.

The project offers support that is consistent, inclusive, and longitudinal, spanning the college to university transition. Mobile technologies offer real advantages by making it as easy as possible for students to engage on their own terms with open access resources. However, as use of open access resources grows more widespread, familiar monitoring and evaluation techniques may increasingly prove to be insufficient. In the rapidly evolving world of mobile technologies, new approaches to managing these initiatives are required to ensure that their potential for student support can be fully exploited.

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