

The First in Family pilot podcast

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CASE STUDY

The *First in Family* pilot podcast

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the *First in Family* pilot podcast project was for students and staff to work together to produce a podcast which would support the student experience and recruitment of first-generation students (FGSs). This case study reports on the project, which used funds from the University of Reading's Partnerships in Learning and Teaching scheme to enable the pilot to be realised and market research data to be collected and reviewed. We explain how we researched and investigated podcast format, production, and broadcast, as well as brainstormed key issues that affect FGSs. We then produced a pilot episode for further market research. We present our ways of working, indicate what feedback we gleaned from the market research, and how we intend to use the feedback to apply for greater funding to produce and broadcast a monthly or bi-weekly podcast for FGSs.

KEYWORDS

first-generation students, podcast, partnership

This case study reports on the *First in Family* pilot podcast project. The main aim of this project was for students and staff to work together to research and pilot a podcast entitled *First in Family*. The podcast is aimed at first-generation students (FGSs) in the UK, as defined in Section 1.1 below, whether they are current students or graduates, with a view to working out how we can best encourage and support such students. As far as we were aware, the only other podcast in this area is *The First-Gen Lounge* (2016-2025), which is specifically for FGSs who are immigrants to the US.

The project aligns with “community” (promoting equality, diversity and inclusion) and “engaged university” in the University Strategy 2020-2025. It also seeks to align with the University’s “Principles of Partnership” (University of Reading n.d.), which require that student-staff partnership projects:

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- are based on values of trust and respect;
- seek to be empowering and inclusive;
- enable the collaborative development of meaningful change; and
- create a sense of belonging to our university community.

These Principles of Partnership were developed in consultation with student academic representatives, the student union of our university, and staff, with a view to informing student partnership work and ensuring we work towards shared goals, creative positive change, and provide “an opportunity to learn from the diversity of unique experiences” (University of Reading n.d.).

1.1 First Generation Students

Defined by Spiegler and Bednarek (2013: 318) as “students whose parents have not obtained a higher education qualification”, FGSs have been found to experience more difficulty transitioning to university than their peers (Pascarella et al. 2004) and to be more likely to drop out of university (Henderson et al. 2020; Pascarella et al. 2004). In the broader context of learning how universities can support students from diverse backgrounds to succeed in higher education, it is crucial to understand the FGS experience and how this impacts their transition to university study and their final degree outcomes. One way of addressing this is by directly communicating with successful current and former FGSs and publically disseminating their experience.

1.2 Podcasts and Podcasting

Podcasts are (mainly) themed audio programmes made in digital format. They can be listened to either via a website or, more commonly, streamed or downloaded via apps to a mobile device such as a tablet or smartphone. Podcasts come in several formats, two common ones being an informal interview approach (see, e.g., Rosen, 2007-present) and a monologue (see, e.g., Goodman, 2024).

Podcasts are often accompanied by a website that gives show notes, transcripts, links to previous episodes, and links to other related material outside the podcast itself. Largely free of charge to listen to, podcasts usually have advertisements and/or sponsorship. In many cases, there is the opportunity to listen ad-free on payment of a subscription fee; this can often open access to further resources, such as videos and streamed content available via a digital television channel.

Podcasting as a form of online mass communication in education is gaining steadily in interest (Strickland et al. 2021). According to Edison Research (2019, cited in Strickland et al. 2021), for example, 32% of people aged 12 and above in the United States listened to podcasts, and of those, 74% said they listened for educational purposes. Strickland et al. (2021) highlight that there are more than 1.2 million podcasts on the Apple platform alone, with over 50 billion podcast downloads in 2018. The potential of podcasts for public engagement, therefore, cannot be underestimated.

2. THE PROJECT

The project involved student and staff partners, most of whom are FSGs themselves, in the following activities:

- researching common problematic issues for First-Gen students;
- researching podcasts as a genre to identify the features which make successful podcasts most interesting;
- creating a format for our podcast;
- producing a pilot podcast episode;
- conducting market research on the pilot in the form of a survey.

We also investigated the logistics of creating podcasts (equipment, music, visuals, hosting platforms and costs) with a view to writing an application for further grant funding.

2.1 Initial actions

Initial actions regarding the First in Family podcast were to recruit student partners and apply for small grant funding from the Partnerships in Learning and Teaching (PLanT) initiative at the University of Reading. One lead student partner (Lily Dewar) and five others (Evelyn Buswell, Meg Cordell, Jake Ishiguro-Shute, Hannah Milne and Rachel Wilcox) were recruited by the lead staff partner (Jane Setter) from two different Schools at the University of Reading by circulating an email asking for expressions of interest. Together, and with input from four other staff members, including Vesna Stojanovik, we drafted the application for funding in November 2023. Once approved in January 2024, funding was used to pay the student partners to research the conventions of podcasts and the means of recording and producing episodes.

Upon approval of the funding, we organised a meeting to discuss our initial thoughts on the process as, in the first author's experience with student partnership projects (see, e.g., Becker, Collier & Setter 2018), talking things through in real-time often improves creativity and helps student partners feel like they are an equal part of that process. This first meeting, facilitated by the first author and minuted by student partner Rachel Wilcox, sought to outline what research needed to be conducted to understand the traditional features of podcasts. This level of research consisted of noting the general formats of podcast episodes, interview structures, and the possible topics for the pilot.

Several elements from this research were later implemented in our pilot episode. For example, a semi-structured interview style best suited our needs to allow for an informative yet personal nature to podcast episodes. Additionally, this research entailed looking at the possible platforms available to distribute the podcast once produced. Despite the popularity of platforms like Apple Podcasts and Spotify, we decided that, for the pilot episode, YouTube would be more practical, given its accessibility. Once the students of the team had conducted this initial research,

they presented their findings at a second meeting, and specific roles were allocated to the student partners, either by self-selection or by agreement to take on specific tasks.

Student partners who were unavailable to attend either meeting contributed by adding their thoughts to minutes that were taken by Rachel Wilcox and shared via the University's OneDrive. This also gave students who were less inclined to speak during the meetings an opportunity to add their thoughts.

The team decided that the topic for the pilot episode would be student partner Jake Ishiguro-Shute's general FGS experience, from motivation to study, funding and application to how they felt the first year of the programme was going and whether they were satisfied they had made the right choice by entering higher education.

Rachel Wilcox elected to research podcast production practices to better understand what was needed to produce a good-quality recording. Findings included using audio recording software such as Audacity, a noise-free environment such as a sound-treated room, and quality microphones.

Student partners Meg Cordell, Jake Ishiguro-Shute and Hannah Milne worked to outline a working guide for the pilot episode. Lead student partner Lily Dewar then produced a post-pilot research instrument to collect feedback on the pilot episode. Once sufficient data were gathered, student partner Evelyn Buswell analysed them to determine the podcast's success and our next steps (see section 2.3).

2.2 Podcast production

Following production of the episode guide, Jake Ishiguro-Shute and Jane Setter proceeded to record the pilot episode, taking into account Rachel Wilcox's prior investigation of podcast practice. Equipment owned by Jane Setter or bought with her Staff Development Account was used to record the episode. A colleague within the Computer Science department, Pat Parslow, was asked to generate several logo options using Generative AI; these were narrowed down to the final choice by taking votes from the group members. The audio was then edited into a static image (the logo) video clip. Subtitles were added using YuJa to support the podcast's accessibility. This first version was uploaded to the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics YouTube channel at The University of Reading and given a narrow distribution among the team and a few additional colleagues to capture any issues before public circulation.

A final version was circulated on YouTube on 11th March 2024 (see Setter, 2024), with a link to a Microsoft form that Lily Dewar had constructed to act as the feedback instrument. The pilot was spread primarily through the social media accounts of Jane Setter and the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, and mailing lists at the university and externally (BAAP, the NTFS mailing list, etc.). It has since accumulated over 450 views on YouTube, with the feedback form having 24 responses to date. The public research element of this project followed ethical guidance according to the requirements of the University of Reading.

2.3 Analysis of feedback

After retrieving responses, student partner Evelyn Buswell analysed the Microsoft form results. Twenty-four listeners completed the form. Figure 2.1 indicates their current academic status.

Figure 2.1. Respondents' academic status.

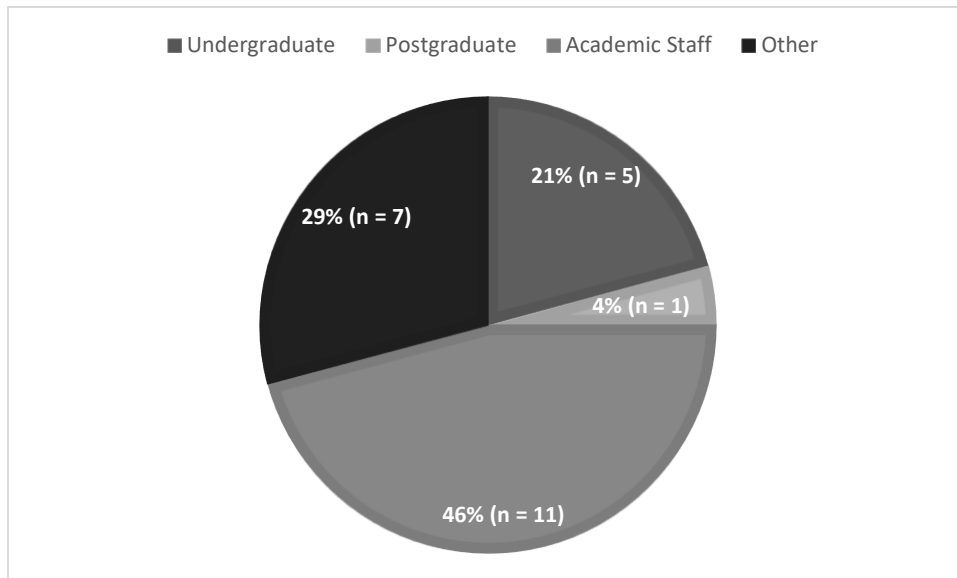
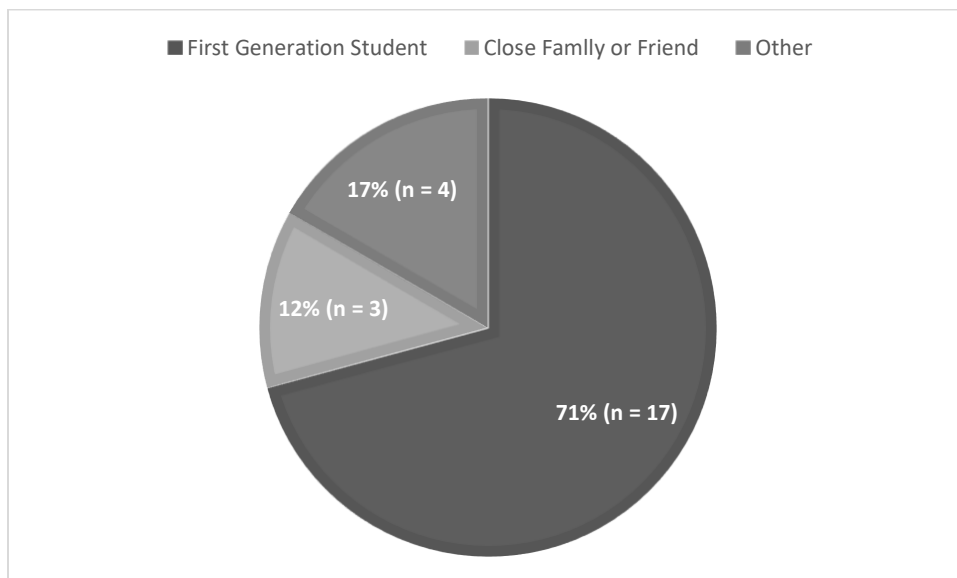


Figure 2.2 indicates the respondents' backgrounds. 83% (20) were FGSs or connected to FGSs.

Figure 2.2. Respondents' backgrounds.



18 (75%) of the 24 respondents regularly listened to podcasts, which gave us confidence that we would get good feedback from experienced podcast listeners. Platforms mentioned by the participants included Spotify, YouTube and Apple Podcasts.

We found that, in general, people enjoyed the episode, thought it to be informative and well-made, and would listen to further episodes. They also liked the interview style, warmth and engagement of the speakers. Positive comments included:

“Great to hear this student’s lived experience coming through.”

“It was a well-structured and interesting podcast and illustrated the difficulties that some find in progressing to university, especially when not following the traditional route.”

“I hope you can make more episodes! And find a way of getting the word out, as that is typically the hardest thing. Thank you!”

“So nice to hear a podcast where people aren't screeching at me, and the participants aren't talking over each other!”

However, we also noted key development areas demonstrated from feedback. These included the length of the episode (28 minutes 25 seconds), which some thought to be too long, and perhaps having some music, like a short jingle, to break up the podcast and as a theme. Additionally, some responses suggested that the aim of the podcast series should be mentioned at the beginning of each episode to clarify the goals of the podcast and its intended audience. Comments and suggestions included:

“I thought the interviewee was a bit nervous (maybe some pre-recording warm up session).”

“If you would like sixth formers to engage with the podcast, half an hour is too long....indeed it may even be too long for first year undergrads.”

Results from the questionnaire also offered suggestions for future topics, such as navigating university with uncertain/unsupportive parents, gathering information for FGSs to inform decisions surrounding the university, or considering students from various backgrounds who are also FGSs. Comments and suggestions included:

“Being a first-in-family student and studying abroad. How do first-in-family students gather information about where to study.”

“[W]hat kind of professional/work experiences might be a strength or help you in your studies as I think this might not always be obvious but could help to boost confidence.”

“It wasn’t really an omission, but there was no mention of mature students who are also first-time students and their particular challenges.”

“[...] For instance, being a mature student - we perhaps have less "tidy" journeys into HE (I know I did) - also the idea of not being intellectual enough (this bothers me even though I am now a research fellow!), which is partly because the sort of conversations our colleagues think are normal are actually quite unusual amongst working-class families and it's an effort to get used to engaging differently. It can be very difficult to discuss work with my family.”

We also received several offers from people willing to be interviewed for the podcast.

2.4 Analysis of the implementation of the practice

Working together on this project went very smoothly, with all student and staff participants playing their part as designated, the pilot episode delivered, and the data collected and analysed to reveal feedback that will help us improve the podcast once we launch it. It was reassuring to find that most respondents to the survey were experienced podcast listeners and thus well attuned to what good podcasts may look like. The podcast was positively received, with respondents praising the content and structure and making helpful suggestions for improving it. For example, we will shorten the length of episodes, include a warm-up activity to help the interviewee relax, and invest in some music. Therefore, the team can consider it to be a very successful project and would not have done anything differently. It also adheres to the University’s “Principles of Partnership” (University of Reading n.d.), particularly, we feel, student-staff trust and respect (e.g., students’ different skill sets were put to good effect; during meetings, students could have their cameras on or off; expectations were well managed; and so on). A further example is the subsequent joint production of this paper.

3. NEXT STEPS

Our next steps are primarily to seek further, more fulsome funding, either from one of the University’s own Teaching and Learning funding schemes or from bodies such as the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), to launch the podcast in earnest. Funding would allow us to purchase better equipment, seek placement on a dedicated podcast platform, pay for a jingle/theme to be produced, and provide money for production costs.

Where the platform is concerned, we are likely to use a service such as Podbean, which will allow the content to be accessible on various platforms, such as Spotify and Apple Podcasts. We will also likely post a subtitled version on YouTube.

As this was a pilot podcast, we took on board the fact that we could not cover a wide range of topics and issues affecting FGSSs; we had one interviewee and so were constrained by that person’s experience, illuminating as it was. We would like to continue the production of the podcast, likely every month, for one year in the initial stages in order to ensure that we cover the

range of topics that listeners have suggested and more. Furthermore, it would allow ample opportunities for other FGS graduates, their families, and colleagues to share their thoughts and experiences by appearing on the podcast. We will also aim to produce shorter episodes and focus more clearly on specific issues in those episodes.

Once launched, it is envisaged that the podcast itself will involve interviews with people who are/were FGSs (including from the project team), family members of those students, and policy makers and those involved in supporting FGSs while at university, among others. This group of students/graduates is likely to include commuters, care-leavers, and those from other populations who are less likely to engage with university education. It also has the potential to be far-reaching in its remit and appeal. It may also be possible to draw in celebrities and other prominent members of society who were also FGSs.

Since educational podcasting is gaining popularity (Strickland et al. 2021), it could potentially enable the Departments involved and the University to engage more effectively with FGS applicants and improve the proportion of students in that and related areas.

As the intention was to produce a pilot, we ask that this project be viewed in those terms. Other than the small number of those who participated in the questionnaire, we do not currently have information on the project's impact on students, staff, practice, or policy. It is hoped that this information will come to light once the podcast is launched in earnest, but note that it may take some time to have an impact.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Setter is a professor of phonetics at the University of Reading, UK. A National Teaching Fellow of the UK's Advance HE, Jane's interests are working with students as partners in curriculum development and supporting students from diverse backgrounds to succeed in UKHE. Jane's research includes work on speech rhythm and intonation.

At the time of the project, **Lily Dewar, Jake Ishiguro-Shute, and Hannah Milne** were all undergraduate students in English Language and Linguistics at the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. **Evelyn Buswell, Meg Cordell and Rachel Wilcox** were all undergraduate students in the MSci Speech and Language Therapy in the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences at the University of Reading.

Vesna Stojanovik is a professor of clinical linguistics in the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences. Her research focuses on language and communication development in children with different conditions, such as Williams and Down syndrome. She has been teaching speech and language therapy courses for over two decades.

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