

Towards an Undergraduate Research Journal

supported by the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research

Notes from the meeting held at Oxford Brookes University, May 18, 2006

Present:

Andrew Castley, Centre for Academic Practice, University of Warwick

John Creighton, Undergraduate Research Skills CETL, University of Reading

Anne Crook, Undergraduate Research Skills CETL, University of Reading

Richard Francis, National Teaching Fellow, Media Workshop, Oxford Brookes University

Alan Jenkins, Reinvention Centre Fellow, Oxford Brookes University

Cath Lambert, Reinvention Centre Academic Coordinator, University of Warwick

Ann (Wendy) Miller, University of Gloucestershire

Rob Pope, Reinvention Centre Fellow, Oxford Brookes University

Jack Potter, Academic Development, Trinity College, Dublin and previously at Chester College where she founded the undergraduate journal in Biosciences at Chester – Origin <http://www.chester.ac.uk/origin/>

Elaine Seymour, University of Colorado at Boulder

Pete Smith, Reinvention Centre Academic Coordinator, Oxford Brookes University

Claire Squires, Senior Lecturer in Publishing, Oxford Brookes University

Helen Walkington, Teaching Fellow (Geography), Oxford Brookes University

Nathan Wiles, Postgraduate student in Publishing, Oxford Brookes University,

(Apologies from: Richard Huggins, Assistant Dean of Social Sciences, Brookes; Clive Robertson, Dean of Learning and Teaching, Brookes; Phil Whitehead, Creative and Performing Arts, Brookes; and Caroline Marsh, Scholarship of Engagement in Politics FDTL, Warwick).

The session was convened and chaired by Alan Jenkins and run as a series of round-the-room or open responses to key issues. It will be represented accordingly, more or less in the order voiced.

General desirability and feasibility of an Undergraduate Research Journal

It was unanimously agreed from the outset that an Undergraduate Research Journal is both desirable and feasible. The following one-off comments and queries helped get us going:

- It will provide sustainability for undergraduate research
- It has to be taken seriously academically
- It must be student-based, though there is a question of quality control
- Student-led or student participation with more or less staff input
- How much staff effort and input?
- Electronic journal will be cheaper and more flexible
- Subject or topic or institutional focus? A single interdisciplinary journal and/or a suite of discipline-based journals?
- Supported by a strong cohort of MA students in Publishing at Brookes in search of real projects – but as individuals only involved for a year
- Importance of research and writing for a variety of real-life addressees and purposes, beyond courses and tutor-markers as sole readers
- Example of use of ‘Wikis’ and ‘Blogs’ in developing a virtual learning environment and an active community of student learners, Possibilities of non-tutor-centred knowledge.

Value of Undergraduate Research Journal to students, staff, subjects, between institutions, wider community . . .

An Undergraduate Research Journal would:

- present models of some of the best student work each year to following years; raise expectations and esteem
- put research at the heart of the undergraduate experience, not just in dissertations (which would also be refreshed)
- demonstrate that what students do has relevance beyond getting a degree; ensure a sense of real purpose and wider audience
- supply a record as well as a souvenir of undergraduate work to be shown to family, friends and prospective employers
- provide a basis for practical and focused collaboration between institutions, most immediately Brookes and Warwick through the Reinvention Centre but also potentially with other CETLS, institutions and communities
- help with marketing (including open days) by providing a palpable and attractive example of what students actually do
- be a non-threatening way of developing a research environment, including staff who might be supposedly ‘research inactive’
- yet also be built into the RAE profile of the contributing staff, students and subject areas (through peer-review process and use of ISSN, for example)
- encourage and enable students to continue to MA and PhD
- support inter- and cross-disciplinary work and communities
- have many unintended and unpredictable yet potentially very valuable outcomes for staff, students and learning and knowledge communities

Practical questions and crucial decisions

These were broken down into four areas – Brookes and/or Warwick; Format (Electronic and/or paper); Student involvement; Focus.

Brookes and /or Warwick?

It was unanimously agreed that the journal should be a joint/linked venture uniting and linking Brookes and Warwick through the Reinvention Centre. Clearly there may have to be separate areas of action within the two institutions but this journal was an excellent way to link staff and students across the two institutions.

Electronic and/or paper?

Electronic format was agreed to be flexible, immediately available and open to the addition of video-stream and sound links. It can involve interaction, rolling publication and flexible inputs. The result is more openly process-based, a learning community.

Paper format was agreed to be portable and attractive, something you could handle and pass round but tends to be more narrowly textual and tied into a specific publishing cycle. The result is more product-centred, a fixed object.

Both can be accommodated by use of electronic pdf files with print on demand. (Prepared shiny covers/folder are an optional extra, and can in turn be the focus for student design projects and competitions.)

Student involvement

Students should be involved and as far as possible responsible at every level: in submissions, review process, editorial (commissioning, copy, etc.), design, production, marketing and dissemination. Staff would also be involved but as far as possible as advisers and supports. Staff would be initial – and perhaps continuously – important in drawing attention to the journal and encouraging submission to and participation in it through their courses, supervisions and tutorials. The following additional observations were made:

- Publishing students (at Brookes) need real-life projects and experience to learn through and to show to prospective employers. This can occur at undergrad and postgrad levels and involve course credit or be independent.
- Student fellowships could be targeted at Warwick and Brookes to support the editorial and production process
- Quality and credibility of final product are an issue, even though the emphasis should fall on the process. This may involve additional staff guidance and support, but need not be on an individual professor-apprentice model. It should be more open and collaborative, with a pool of expertise to draw on.

- The current student body is often involved in work outside university too; encouragement and incentives need to be linked to processes and products that are evidently beneficial to their life prospects (future work, further research) as well as personal satisfaction and prestige amongst peers

Focus of journal

The eventual consensus of the meeting was that the journal should be *interdisciplinary*, even if (as is likely) individual submissions would be grounded in particular areas and specific disciplines. The actual feel of it might thus be more *cross-disciplinary*, involving selective reading. It was suggested that the precise shape and emphasis (which would change anyway) should be left to a substantially student committee/cooperative to decide. Though it was also observed that things only emerge in relation to a framework. There might need to be clear steers in the project guidelines and perhaps from staff (at least initially) about ways of identifying likely topics, themes, emphases, directions. These would necessarily involve a shifting mix of prospective commissioning/searching and retrospective gap-filling/supplementing - as well as, presumably, plenty of first and last minute 'circumspection' (nobody actually said that last bit then; it just seems a good idea now). The following further observations were made:

- There should be an attempt to represent and encourage many kinds of research writing at many levels: field-trip write-ups; reviews; course case studies; overviews – not just third-year dissertations/projects (though these were likely/possible to provide the research core?)
- Information about and encouragement to consider submission to the research journal might be incorporated into the format for students' Personal Development Profiles
- Use of an electronic format would encourage the development of a learning environment (including 'Wikis') that would be far more flexible and various than the journal alone; though the latter could be a focus for aspiration
- The journal might, for example, be called '*Emergence*' – with the option of an extra '-y' if it all goes wrong!

Taking the Project Forward to Implementation

This could be (immediately) progressed through:

- Richard Francis creating a Wiki to progress the project
- A selected student project team from Brookes publishing students and selected Warwick students developing a business model supported by Reinvention Centre student fellowship(s)
- Reinvention Fellowship(s) to a team of staff from Brookes and Warwick to develop and support (with students) the Journal.
- The possibility of external sponsorship may offer longer term support.

Rob Pope and Alan Jenkins May 23, 2006