

[P23] Establishing an undergraduate research journal: staff perceptions and pitfalls

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Undergraduates often do significant research work, as part of final year projects or dissertations. We consider this research to have intrinsic value and intellectual importance, to the student, to his/her supervisor and department and to the wider academic community. In most cases, it remains unpublished and unexploited. We have therefore sought to establish an appropriate and effective means for its publication.

Our goal was to establish a vehicle for the publication of the best u/g research work performed each year in our School. All our students carry out a final year research project. They produce a dissertation which is the product of a full year's exposure to a significant intellectual problem, involving considerable amounts of practical or theoretical work. Students work closely with a member of academic or research staff, often contributing to the efforts of a research team. Very occasionally, this work is published by traditional routes or has direct practical application, but in most cases even the best research receives no external exposure.

We were aware of two u/g research journals produced by UK bioscience departments (*Origin*, a paper-based publication by University College Chester; *Biolog-e*, an on-line journal at the University of Leeds) and of several examples in the US (covering a variety of disciplines). However, we could find no standard approach, nor any significant discussion of the difficulties which might attend such a venture.

We set out to establish an on-line publication, with the following aims: 1) to promote our School's u/g research, 2) to expose students to the disciplines of publication, 3) to provide a marketing tool for widening participation, 4) to enable students to promote themselves to employers. It was evident that to be acceptable to both students and academic colleagues, such a publication would have to be of high intellectual quality and would have to reflect well on the research and educational values of the School. It would also have to depend on minimal input of staff time and effort, and fit appropriately with the tight calendar of the final year of u/g study.

Initial discussions with colleagues elicited considerable support for the venture but also revealed some significant anxieties. Chief amongst these were issues related to prior publication, scientific integrity and intellectual responsibility. Even though direct publication of u/g work is currently rare, colleagues were concerned that this possibility might be pre-empted by publication in an u/g journal, especially where the student had contributed to the work of a group or had assisted in the analysis of data to be made use of later. Some colleagues considered that individual student project work would be too slight to justify full publication and that it would dilute the quality and value of other research being carried out in the School. Others felt that research supervisors would want to be involved in writing and editing submissions, so as to maintain quality and establish proper responsibility, but would be reluctant to devote the necessary time and effort. One colleague feared the elitism that might result from publishing some projects but not others.

Reflecting on these concerns, we identified a fundamental difficulty associated with the term 'publication'. Whilst we had envisaged the creation of a fully citable 'journal' with peer-reviewed content and an ISSN, it was evident that the implications of this approach within a research-intensive institution might make it impossible to achieve in practice. On the one hand, staff might be reluctant to recommend work for publication. On the other, editorial constraints and the need for institutional and academic responsibility might create too long a gap between the completion of the work and its eventual appearance in the journal. We felt strongly that to achieve the aims of the venture, student research articles would have to demonstrate immediacy and should properly reflect the efforts of the student authors themselves.

Given these considerations, we have created an online record of undergraduate research, called BURN (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sbzml/>), which we refer to as a 'showcase' rather than a journal. This is in the public domain and represents the University of Nottingham, but it has no ISSN. Staff in our teaching Divisions are asked to nominate students who have done the best research of the year, and they have the option of excluding any whose work might be published elsewhere. The recommended students are invited to submit manuscripts, under single authorship, as soon after the completion of their formal period of study as is practicable. The resulting articles undergo light editing but are not peer-reviewed: the quality and integrity of the published material are assumed on the basis of the rigorous assessment process to which all out u/g research projects and dissertations are exposed. Overall, staff involvement has been minimal and may be reduced even further in future by the use of postgraduate editors.

Response to this venture has been positive both inside and outside the University; we therefore believe that our showcase of u/g research is fulfilling its aims whilst addressing the concerns of colleagues. The showcase is selective but we reject the pejorative term 'elitist' on the grounds that it promotes an excellence attainable by all students and contributes to the promotion of u/g research across the School. Our longer term objective remains the achievement of full publication status, but it is not yet clear how this is to be accomplished given the research-intensive nature of the environment in which our students are educated.

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