

Project Title

The Plymouth Student e-Journals: Embedding and Disseminating Good Practice

Details of Project Team

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Additional support has also been provided by Cathy Schofield, Claire Gray and Ross Pomeroy, University Plymouth Colleges; and Dr Rebecca Turner, Higher Education Learning Partnerships CETL.

Background to the Project

The value of e-journals to support research-informed teaching activities has been highlighted by Jenkins, Healey & Zetter (2007), with the typical emphasis on dissemination of student work rather than supporting teaching activities. However, we believe that student e-journals can be beneficial for both staff and students and have developed three e-journals which appear to meet both stakeholder group interests. 'The Plymouth Student Scientist' e-journal was launched in Jan 2008 and has already been selected as a case study of good practice by a National Teaching Fellowship project at Gloucestershire University and has received critical acclaim by other external sources (e.g. a commendation by the British Psychology Society during their visit for accreditation in April 2008). Prof. Alan Jenkins has also used it as a case study in a Walkington & Jenkins (2008) article on 'embedding undergraduate research' and was so impressed with our innovative approach to both student research dissemination and pedagogic support for staff that he agreed to write the guest editorial for us in autumn 2008. At the end of 2008, this e-journal had over 2 million 'hits' and had published 4 issues by the end of 2009. The Plymouth Student Educator and The Plymouth Student Journal of Health & Social Work followed, being launched in April 2009. They effectively demonstrated that the chosen model could be successfully applied across the disciplines.

Summary of the aims of the project

This project aimed to:

- Continue the excellent provision of three undergraduate e-journals and ensure they were embedded, and disseminated good practice to partner colleges
- Provide an opportunity for more students (on different programmes) to engage with this initiative and to have their research work published
- Explore the opportunities for the long-term sustainability of e-journals in the University beyond the time-frame of RiT funding.

This initiative continued to publish a variety of research-led, research-based and research-orientated work, where undergraduates were invited to submit coursework which had been marked (and moderated) as 'excellent', for dissemination via the three e-journals. Publication has enabled other students to see high quality work, especially students and staff in partner colleges who have requested to see

examples of research work at H.E Level 6. (The Education e-journal actually included a Foundation degree student's work in its first issue, as well as Level 4 & 5 work). The e-journals have also allowed students to reflect on their own research ability and skills to produce similar evidence-based articles. Academic staff have been using the published articles as resources during teaching sessions, to highlight how research problems can be tackled and to encourage evaluation of such work (e.g. Why were these methods used and how could the work be improved?). The flexibility of the e-journals continues to support the publication of large documents such as conference posters, extending the shelf-life beyond the conference they were presented at. In addition, the special interest section of the journals allows staff to contribute to the e-journal in the form of collaborative work with students, helping to promote the research element in our programmes and how students can get involved (research-orientated activities).

Methods

We adopted an action research methodology to achieve the main outcomes of the proposal, involving staff and student stakeholders (from within the University and partner colleges) to evaluate and embed this initiative. The funded element of the project commenced in October 2009 and finished at the end of March 2010.

Data and Material Required

- For The Plymouth Student Scientist, electronic copies of Level 6 student research work, including projects, literature reviews and special interest articles, such as posters, staff-student collaborations, and critical article evaluations (supported by academic staff following assessment as 1st class).
- For The Plymouth Student Educator: electronic copies of Level 4 to Level 6 student research work, including projects, reflective practice and pieces on topical issues (peer-reviewed by academic staff following assessment as 1st class).
- For The Plymouth Student Journal of Health & Social Work: electronic copies of Level 4 to Level 6 student research work, including projects, literature reviews, case studies, reflective practice, research proposals and poster presentations (supported by academic staff following assessment as 1st class).
- Consent forms signed by student authors of submitted work, as well as the academic tutors involved.
- Evidence of publication in the journals, or use of the journals, by new target students.
- Survey information from students that previously attended UPC Foundation Degree courses prior to transferring to a University final year science programme (indicating views on transition and potential role of e-journal to support learning into the honours year).
- Information from college teaching staff indicating: level of support for the e-journal initiative and views on how the journal might enhance their own

teaching or support for students going through the transition from Foundation Degree to a Level 5 or 6 programme at the University.

Methods of Obtaining Data

- This was an action research case study that enabled a study of both product outcome and process.
- Material copy for publication of the journals was obtained through direct calls to students and project tutors via email, as well as by liaising with e-journal 'champions' representing specific Schools or whole Faculties. Material for The Plymouth Student Educator was submitted following a process of peer review involving tutors from the Faculty of Education.
- The publication of the e-journals enabled online tracking data to be obtained.
- Promotion tactics were employed to disseminate information about the existing journals. These included a conference presentation, a webcast and direct e-mails to staff using circulation lists e.g. Health Trusts and Partner Colleges within the Health Partnership.
- Using Perseus Survey Solutions software, an electronic survey questionnaire was carried out. It was disseminated as an email attachment, targeting students that had made the transition from a UPC Foundation Degree course to a 2nd or final year Faculty of Science Honours Degree programme in 2009/10. Survey forms were also submitted by hand to tutor groups.
- Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with teaching staff from Truro College science programmes.

Methods of Analyzing Data

- The traffic use of the online journals is monitored by a built-in stats package. Data include the number of site hits and visits, the methods by which users access the journal, and the geographical distribution of journal users. These statistics are retrievable on an hourly, daily or monthly basis.
- The journal software (Open Journal Software) also provides figures for individual article and abstract viewings.
- The data resulting from the student survey was collated and graphically presented within the Perseus Software Solutions programme, and then converted and edited using Microsoft PowerPoint. Simple quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel.
- Staff interviews were also thematically analysed manually.
- The results of the survey and interviews will continue to be used to make iterative changes to the journals.

Ethical Issues

- Approval for all research methods was granted by the Faculty of Science and Technology Human Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the project.
- Student and staff involvement in the online and hard copy surveys, and interviews, was entirely voluntary.
- All survey and evaluation data has remained anonymous.

Number of Students Involved

Total number of graduates that consented to have their research work published in issues of 'The Plymouth Student Scientist', 'The Plymouth Student Educator' and 'The Plymouth Student Journal of Health & Social Work' during the funded project period = 26.

Total number of final year Faculty of Science & Technology transfer students that responded to the online questionnaire = 25 (53%).

Number of Staff Involved

Total number of staff members from all Faculties involved in supporting student submissions to the journals = 25.

Total number of partner college staff that participated in the telephone interviews = 10.

Number of staff attending UPC conference including e-journal presentation = 51.

Findings

The research element of this study attempted to identify whether an undergraduate e-journal, containing research by previous Plymouth graduates, would be considered beneficial to the transition process by former Foundation Degree students now studying 'top-up' programmes at the University. The views on potential benefits (and related issues) of a sample of college-based staff were also sought.

The key findings were:

- College staff interviews showed mixed perceptions about students' preparedness for University.
- Unanimous staff support for role of e-journal prior to transition: for exposure to good practice and for aspirational purposes.
- Transfer students valued e-journal prior to and during transition, to see standards, style & content.
- E-journal has a key role to play from both staff and student perspectives in partner colleges.

Project Outputs

Conference Contributions

Gresty, K. & Edwards-Jones, A. (2010) *Making a Difference to Transition from Foundation Degrees into Final Year University Science Programmes*. Paper presentation at the 5th International Inquiring Pedagogies Conference (iPED) 'Conceptualising Impact: Exploring the effectiveness of practice through pedagogic research'. Coventry University, England, 15 September.

Edwards, A. & Gresty, K. (2009) *Using an undergraduate e-journal to support research-informed teaching*. Paper presentation at the UPC Joint Subject Forum Event, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, England. 28 May. Available at: <http://staff.plymouth.ac.uk//upcpd/UPCConferenceMaterials/intranet.htm>

Online Works

During the funding period, a further issue of each of the three student e-journals was published. The number of successful full-text article requests during the same period = 20,851.

The Plymouth e-journal sites received 16,453 hits and 2,710 individual visits in the period between 01/10 – 31/3.

Dissemination

An attempt was made to increase the awareness about the e-journals among UPC college staff by inviting every tutor to participate in a webcast. The intention was to provide information about the journals and also to obtain a sample of staff views on the potential benefits and uses of an e-journal to their teaching, including role in students' transition to University degree programmes. Unfortunately, no staff members logged-on for the session, however it did facilitate a link to a college tutor who expressed interest in setting up a similar journal for UPC science students. This has resulted in a two-way exchange, whereby advice on setting up an e-journal was shared for help with recruitment of a small number of teaching staff for telephone interviews.

Following positive efforts by the Associate Dean (Teaching & Learning), Faculty of Health, to increase awareness of the Health & Social Work e-journal within the Faculty, the Health Partnership expressed great interest in the initiative and further disseminated communication among their membership Trusts and Partner Colleges. We have evidence from the telephone interviews that this has led to examples of the journal being used by college tutors to showcase good research practice to Foundation Degree students.

Continuation/Dissemination Plans

Conference Contributions

Leading national figures in the field of mainstreaming undergraduate research (Profs Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins) have been impressed by the expansion of the e-journal initiative across the institution and have invited the researchers to present a poster at the pre- ISSOTL conference workshop 'International Perspectives on Undergraduate Research and Inquiry: A Scholarly Discussion' in Liverpool, October 2010, organised by the Council On Undergraduate Research (CUR).

Suggested Further Research or Development Work

Following further recruitment of additional college tutors to participate in telephone interviews, the findings should then be robust enough for submission of a paper to a mainstream academic education journal.

The journal initiative will continue to be promoted to college staff and students, for example, at the UPC Staff Induction Day in September 2010, and at PGCAP staff development sessions.

Despite the continued success of all the e-journals, and some Faculty of Science & Technology funding, long term arrangements still need to be put into place to secure the future of the journals. The Head of TEL has started to address this matter via the Learning Technologist team and is seeking strategic support from the Associate Deans (Teaching & Learning). It is hoped this movement will continue during the latter part of 2010 and into 2011 and that eventually, the e-journals will be moved into the University from the current hosting company (ICO³) to ensure long term sustainability.

How does the project meet the TQEF funding aims?

1. *Ensuring that students are made aware of the most up-to-date knowledge in their field:* the journals provide an explicit opportunity for current research work carried out by students (including staff/student collaborations) to be disseminated to peers and to Foundation Degree students.

2. *Ensuring that staff are aware of developments if they were not previously:* the journals (and research-informed teaching ethos) have been extensively promoted to staff within the University and UP C network via e-mails, interviews, internal staff meetings and conferences and by word of mouth. Staff have been invited to collaborate at many stages of the project and have contacted the project team for information and advice.

3. *Familiarising students with some of the research being undertaken in their institution:* with the Faculties involved in this project spanning a wide number of Schools and many disciplines, the journals provide a rare opportunity for students to

be reconciled with some of the research themes being pursued outside of their own immediate research environment. This is particularly true of college-based students being provided with an easy-to-access resource exemplifying the types of research being conducted by undergraduate students at various levels.

4. *Embedding RiT into institutional structures and policies (including HR and quality assurance processes)*: This successful initiative continues to be disseminated across an increasing number of disciplines in the three Faculties, enabling many other students (and staff) to benefit from a proven resource. Evidence from staff interview responses indicate that within some sections of the University, the journals are being used explicitly as a teaching aid for critical discussion and research methods.

5. *Exposing students to a research-informed learning environment at all levels (stages) in higher education*: the journals provide explicit vehicles for students in all years to experience aspects of a real research publication process. This latest phase of this initiative has ensured that more students studying Foundation courses are also exposed to real research that can inform their learning and personal development.

Revised Report Submitted by

Mr Andrew Edwards-Jones (Research Assistant)

Dr Karen Gresty (Project Lead), September 2nd 2010.

Reference List

Healey, M. & Jenkins, A. (2009) *Developing undergraduate research and inquiry*. The Higher Education Academy. York. ISBN 978-1-905788-99-6

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