

2008

# Undergraduate Research Journals: praising success but recognising doubt and even "failure"

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Jenkins, A. (2008) Undergraduate Research Journals: praising success but recognising doubt and even "failure". The Plymouth Student Scientist, 1(2), pp. 1-3.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/13154>

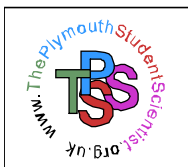
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The Plymouth Student Scientist

University of Plymouth

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## Undergraduate Research Journals; praising success but recognising doubt and even ‘failure’

Alan Jenkins

*“Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations... I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected.” J K Rowling, speaking at the 2008 Harvard Graduation Ceremony*  
<http://harvardmagazine.com/go/jkrowling.html>

*“... universities should treat learning as not yet wholly solved problems and hence always in research mode” [Wilhelm von Humboldt](#) founder of the University of Berlin 1810 (cited by Elton 2005)*

*“Programmes that seek to encourage or support undergraduate research should: Build research opportunities into the formative processes and summative outcomes of course assessment for students in ways that retrace and register how faculty/staff develop and disseminate their own research/learning in their own discipline/professional area, e.g. through undergraduate research journals, student research conferences, exhibitions ... (Jenkins 2008).*

Let me (re) start this editorial by praising the success of the students whose work is featured in this issue. To reach this level they have had to work, think experiment, write and rewrite and then no doubt rewrite what has been rewritten. The result is for them and many others to see their work in the public realm. This for them will no doubt be one of the summits of their undergraduate years. It is also something that they can show their potential employers, friends and parents (My son’s undergraduate research project on YouTube is one of my favourite sites!). Their work also provides a marker for first and second year students as to what they might achieve –and some surpass. For unlike much of the work these writers will have done in the degree, this work is now in the public realm.

Going public with ones’ work is not easy. Of course most of us (I do) want that public recognition. Like stand up comedians we may want the glow of success. But like them...before we get on the stage we will have gone through much doubt and uncertainty. Indeed, some of us may not then actually get on the public stage. Some students who submit their work to undergraduate research journals may have it rejected. As academics many of us had that experience –perhaps many times. Some students (like ‘us’) will have started writing and then found that the research was not strong to present in public. They – like some of us (and certainly including me), have realised as we tried to find the words, the data, the conclusions ...the evidence did not stack up...

So let us also praise, recognise and value the doubts, the uncertainties and yes - the achievements those whose work is featured here, particularly their determination to battle through into this public realm. But let us also praise and recognise those who did not (this time) get through. This can inspire them to go beyond what is here and what they have achieved so far. Maybe they will be ones that really succeed after graduation –whatever they

Journal Title	Remit, institution and website
<b>Biolog E</b>	Faculty of Biosciences University of Leeds <a href="http://www.biolog-e.leeds.ac.uk/Biolog-e/index.php">http://www.biolog-e.leeds.ac.uk/Biolog-e/index.php</a>
<b>Bioscience Horizons</b>	UK and Ireland Published by Oxford Journals <a href="http://biohorizons.oxfordjournals.org/">http://biohorizons.oxfordjournals.org/</a>
<b>BURN</b>	School of Biosciences University of Nottingham <a href="http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/burn/">http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/burn/</a>
<b>Diffusion</b>	All subjects University of Central Lancashire <a href="http://www.uclan.ac.uk/host/nexus/journal.htm">http://www.uclan.ac.uk/host/nexus/journal.htm</a>
<b>GEOverse</b>	Geography National journal being piloted at: Oxford Brookes University, University of Reading, University of Gloucestershire and Queen Mary, University of London <a href="http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/social/geoverse/">http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/social/geoverse/</a>
<b>Geoversity</b>	Geography Oxford Brookes University <a href="http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/social/geoversity/">http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/social/geoversity/</a>
<b>Origin</b>	Bioscience University of Chester <a href="http://www.chester.ac.uk/origin/">http://www.chester.ac.uk/origin/</a>
<b>Reinvention</b>	All subjects The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate research University of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University <a href="http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/cetl/ejournal">http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/cetl/ejournal</a>
<b>SURJ</b>	Physics and Electronic engineering University of Surrey <a href="http://www.eps.surrey.ac.uk/surj/">http://www.eps.surrey.ac.uk/surj/</a>
<b>The Plymouth Student Scientist</b>	Faculty of Science University of Plymouth <a href="http://www.theplymouthstudentscientist.org.uk/">http://www.theplymouthstudentscientist.org.uk/</a>

Table 1: UK Undergraduate Research Journals

think success is. Maybe this experience will lead them on to write or do something that takes them beyond this early experience.

The work of these student researchers also provides deserved recognition for the staff and the institution that has helped them achieve this 'level' of work. But these works, and its publication, also pose hard questions of programme teams, departments and institutions as to whether writing research in the public realm is just for those highly able and committed students who are eventually selected. In the case of the first two issues of this journal only students whose research was awarded a first got their work published. Is publishing student research something we should be supporting for all or many to achieve? Inspired by US style undergraduate research programmes there are now a growing number of UK based undergraduate research journals (Walkington and Jenkins (in submission). See table 1).

Educationally and politically I am attracted by the potential of undergraduate research journals. I think they challenge those institutional firewalls between teaching and research in a UK so sadly dominated by the Research Assessment Exercise, the Lord Voldemort of the academic world. They challenge narrow definitions of research. More fundamentally they can set high standards for students to achieve. They challenge them to put their work in the public realm. Of the UK based journals I think there is much to praise about *The Plymouth Student Scientist*. I warmed strongly to the opening editorial by Mick Uttley with its value statement that while these articles represent "student work that is among the best in the Faculty, they are deliberately presented warts-and-all. It is our intention to show what undergraduate research is really like, not only to illustrate the highest standards possible but to encourage aspiring scientists that good science isn't out of the reach of undergraduates." In conclusion I think this journal has set a bar for other institutions to reach. But I think the task now is to see how to mainstream this approach for all students at Plymouth and other higher education institutions; while also ensuring high level undergraduate research journals for selected students. You have helped show the way forward.

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