

Student Open Access Research (SOAR)

Report to the Centre for Higher Education Research, Innovation and Learning (CHERIL)

1. The aims of the project

The project aims, as outlined in the proposal, were:

- To respond to evidence of demand for student journals.
- To add significant functionality to an existing pilot student journal.
- To explore the value of exposing taught students to research processes.
- To explore the potential benefits in terms of linking learning and research, preparing students for research careers, improving academic skills and preparing the next generation for the new scholarly communications landscape.
- To encourage the sharing of pedagogic reflections by providing the publishing platform to learners engaged in academic skills development.
- To produce a toolkit and business model to ensure sustainability.

2. The methodology

A formal project management approach was used to ensure clarity of roles, effective governance, management of budget and risks, and careful attention to project milestones. The Project Initiation Document is attached (Appendix A). Work was organised into work packages, which were led by either the University of Manchester Library (UML) or Manchester University Press (MUP).

An expert consultant was employed to undertake market research to inform our thinking about service delivery, to benchmark our approach against other institutions, and to engage students in user testing exercises.

3. Key findings and outputs

The project committed to produce some tangible outputs in addition to carrying out research. The deliverables produced by the project are as follows:

- a. A clear framework and support materials for the Manchester Medical School (MMS) student journal.

- b. A draft toolkit upon which to build training materials. (Appendix B and Appendix D Section M, p. 86)
- c. A workshop with students and academics helped to frame the research questions for the project consultant, and a report of the workshop is included as Appendix C.
- d. An analysis, including user testing, of technical platforms on which to deliver a student journal service. (a section of the Consultant's Report – Appendix D Section 16, p. 16).
- e. A benchmarking report on work being done at other institutions (a section of the Consultant's Report – Appendix D Section 9, p. 12).
- f. An investigation into the demand for a student publishing service, and the nature of that demand (a section the Consultant's Report – Appendix D Sections 22 and 23, beginning p. 23) including the potential for publication of learning logs.
- g. Reports of workshops and interviews with students (a section of the Consultant's Report – Appendix D Sections 21, 22 and 23, beginning p. 20)
- h. A prototype student publishing service webpage (Appendix E).
- i. A proposal for follow-up funding to develop a student publishing training service (PuRLS: Appendix F).

The key findings (for a number of which there is much more detail provided in Appendix D) are as follows:

- a. There is clear interest in, and enthusiasm for, learning to publish, but levels of interest are difficult to gauge after engagement with a small number of students and academics.
- b. There is real potential to develop a student publishing service in support of the University's Learning through Research agenda.
- c. The open-source publishing platform currently in use for the MMS student journal looks unlikely to be fit for purpose for a wider service.
- d. The time and commitment needed to produce a student journal are considerable, and need to come from all partners in the process (publishers, students, academics, trainers).
- e. Long-term sustainability requires ongoing editorial leadership, which needs careful management if reliant at least partly upon students who can only be temporary stewards of the journal they are producing.

- f. A student publishing service would be premature at this stage, as levels of interest across the University are unclear. However, there is little doubt that a training offer would be taken up, and could inform views on the numbers of students who might move beyond training to a more significant commitment to establishing and running a student journal.
- g. No evidence has been found to support the notion that learning logs have potential as formal academic publications, and doubts have emerged that this would be appropriate. However, there is potential to offer a more informal channel (such as a blog) which could offer value in terms of sharing experiences and providing evidence of personal development to prospective employers.

4. Recommendations

- a. A modular training course should be developed which would be integrated into a variety of existing central and Faculty/School programmes, and could be considered as a University College course and an open training course as part of the Library's My Learning Essentials suite of courses.
- b. A social media publishing platform such as a blog should be piloted for learning log dissemination.
- c. The market for a student journal publishing service should be tested by engaging with students who take up the training offer.
- d. A decision should be made on a publishing platform that most effectively meets the needs of very inexperienced journal editors, subject to cost.
- e. A service needs to be defined and introduced when there is clarity on its dimensions. There has been some consideration of what this should look like, and a draft service webpage forms Appendix E.
- f. MUP and UML should continue to work in partnership to take forward these recommendations.

5. Strategic contribution

SOAR has aimed to contribute to the University's commitments to research-informed teaching and to developing research skills in its students (both of which form part of Goal 2 (Learning and Student Experience) in the refreshed *Manchester 2020* strategy). The project has also explored directly with students their interest in acquiring publishing skills, revealing demand for learning which Manchester, as a research-intensive institution with both a press and a library with scholarly communication expertise, is well-placed to provide. The direct benefits this has for

Goal 2 are complemented by anticipated indirect benefits for Goal 1 (Research), by preparing taught students with academic aspirations for an important component of a career in research, and one in which Manchester has very clear and urgent priorities (in relation to communication and impact of its research).

6. Lessons learned

SOAR has been iterative, our end point is not quite what we might have expected at the outset, and we have not delivered a sustainable publishing service. The key lessons we have learned along the way, which go some way towards explaining this, are:

- a. Engaging students at the right time of year (when they are both on campus and available) is very important. We were unable to work directly with as many as we would have liked, and so questions remain about levels of interest and demand. To address this, subsequent work will focus on reaching the most interested through the training we will offer, and we will ensure semester and vacations dates are clearly identified in our project plan.
- b. Very high levels of commitment are needed from journal project teams (in terms both of students and their supervisors). This is not a venture to be approached lightly, and the MMS journal project underlines the challenges, even with very able and committed students. For this reason, and the one below, we will switch our focus to training and enabling rather than journal creation and delivery.
- c. Establishing a new Open Access journal is expensive, and at this stage it remains unclear how a new student journal would be made sustainable. However, we have made some progress towards identifying the actual set-up and running costs, which can inform a business case for investment.
- d. There are levels of complexity with the publishing platform we have been using which present greater challenges to trainee editors than we had anticipated. Careful consideration will be given to the pros and cons of remaining with this platform as we develop training materials and further consider the shape of the service.

7. Dissemination plan

There are a number of opportunities open to us to disseminate our findings:

- a. Internally we hope to be invited to contribute to the forthcoming CHERIL conference in December.
- b. The Library maintains a popular blog, Library Research Plus (<http://blog.research-plus.library.manchester.ac.uk/>), and a post about SOAR will be scheduled for later

this year, and then broadcast on social media via the Library's Facebook and Twitter accounts.

- c. Externally, Simon Bains has now been invited to speak at UKSG in April 2016. This is the major UK conference on scholarly communications for librarians, publishers and technology vendors.
- d. MUP will be launching a revamped website early in the New Year and will devote a page to SOAR and additional materials around student journals. Given its global reach it will serve to showcase what has been achieved.
- e. As part of our follow-up project, funding for which has now been confirmed, subject to some clarifications, we will further develop a communications plan to inform colleagues at Manchester about the results of SOAR, and to engage them in the next phase.

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October 2015