

## **Editorial. The future of *Début*: have your say**

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Most work written by undergraduates (or postgraduates for that matter) is seen by no-one except for the assessors. However a growing number of outlets are publishing the work of undergraduates in a variety of disciplines. In the UK these publications include the multidisciplinary *Reinvention* based at Warwick University, *Geoversity* at Oxford Brookes, *Bioscience Horizons* published by Oxford Journals and *SURJ* from the University of Surrey. In the USA undergraduate journals are even more widespread. *Watcher Junior: the undergraduate journal of Whedon Studies*, now into its sixth year is probably the most intriguing (for the uninitiated Joss Whedon is author of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*).

A few years ago I become aware that students are graduating from university without awareness of the peer review process and how knowledge is published in journals. In all honesty I can't remember how or when I learnt about the process myself. Some may regard knowledge of such things as trivial, but it is a key part of how disciplines operate. Reviewers and journals set the boundaries of the discipline, deciding what should and should not be published in contributing to that discipline's scholarship (see Becher and Trowler, 2001). Success in academia depends on publishing work and publishing it in the right outlets. To this end *Début* is presently published under a traditional peer review model. Submissions are anonymised and reviewed by experts in the field (usually academic teaching staff or postgraduate students). I had hoped that this traditional system would enable students, particularly those hoping to have an academic career, to gain experience of how the system works (or doesn't work).

The peer review system has its limitations of course and *Début* is no exception to this. Firstly, we cannot be totally sure that the articles published are better than the articles that were rejected.

A second barrier is the adage that students (in general) don't like doing work which will not count directly towards their degree. Work submitted to *Début* is often derived from essays or dissertations which have already been assessed (and have probably received good marks). Authors do not always appreciate 'negative' feedback on their first class work and there have been instances where authors have not made revisions to their work despite my encouragement.

A third issue is that of standards. What standard of work can reasonably be expected from an undergraduate who has only studied the subject for a couple of years? Furthermore, the papers that students write are not necessarily a specialist area for the teacher who taught the student. About half of papers submitted to *Début* are not published and I suspect that this is often the reason. For example, what seems like a

good attempt on Yoruba linguistics to a linguistics lecturer who does not know the language is not necessarily a good attempt in the estimation of an expert Yoruba linguistics researcher.

### **Reviewing *Début***

The decision of the UK's Higher Education Academy to withdraw funding from its 24 subject centres from August 2011 makes a review of how *Début* operates particularly timely. *Début* is among the activities to be continued by the new Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies whose staff will include many currently employed at the Subject Centre. Various ideas have been put forward to me including:

1. Having teams of students edit special editions of the journal
2. Putting up draft papers for public consultation prior to publication in the journal with editors using this consultation to reach their decision
3. Publish papers without any review process (expect maybe a check for plagiarism)
4. Publish any undergraduate paper accompanied by a reference/recommendation by a lecturer
5. Accept research presented in alternative formats, e.g. posters, videos.
6. Maintain the current double-blind review system

Walkington and Jenkins (2008) observe that the research process (or cycle) is not completed until research is published, therefore most undergraduate research does not complete the process. Whatever 'model' or combination of models is selected the journal will continue to provide a place to demonstrate the high research capabilities of undergraduate students.

To feedback your opinion on the future of *Début*, please email me (j.canning@soton.ac.uk) or post your comments on the *Début* facebook page [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=158224702055](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=158224702055)

### **References**

Becher, T and P. Trowler (2001), *Academic Tribes and Territories*, 2nd ed. (Milton Keynes: Open University Press).

Walkington, H. and A. Jenkins (2008) Embedding undergraduate research publication in the student learning experience. *Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching* 2(3). Available at: <http://bit.ly/b0Bbm3>