

# The *Essex Student Journal*: demonstrating the benefits of diamond open access across the University of Essex and beyond

The *Essex Student Journal* is a diamond open access journal that publishes the work of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students at the University of Essex. The journal editor and all peer reviewers are postgraduate research students at Essex. The *Essex Student Journal* therefore prides itself on being run by students, for students. As well as being a working academic journal, it is also used as an educational tool that introduces University of Essex students and postgraduate researchers to open access publishing. Furthermore, it enables advocacy for diamond open access across the University and beyond, demonstrating the benefits and viability of diamond open access publishing to academic staff and senior leaders. This case study explores how, for relatively small investments, library teams can make a big impact with their students and staff when it comes to diamond open access publishing.

## Keywords

student journal; open access; diamond open access; advocacy; learning tool

## Introducing the *Essex Student Journal*

The *Essex Student Journal*, as the name suggests, is an academic journal that publishes the work of undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students at the University of Essex. The editor is recruited annually from the current postgraduate research (PGR) student body, and all peer reviewing for the journal is also completed by PGR students. In this way, the *Essex Student Journal* prides itself on being a journal run by students, for students. This concept of student-led journals is something that UK higher education is increasingly embracing, as shown through the higher education UK context within a recent case study produced by the University of Bristol.<sup>1</sup> There are many examples of student-led journals across the UK, such as those within University College London,<sup>2</sup> the University of Bristol,<sup>3</sup> and the University of Aberdeen,<sup>4</sup> to name but a few.

Where the *Essex Student Journal* offers something unique compared to other student-led journals is in the way in which it is used as an educational tool to introduce students and staff to diamond open access. Diamond open access means there are no fees involved when publishing with the journal, and all publications can be read online for free. This concept is fundamental to the ethos of the *Essex Student Journal* and was one of the key driving forces behind its relaunch in 2020.

This relaunch was led by the Research Services team within Library and Cultural Services at the University. The journal previously operated under the name *Essex Student Research Online* (ESTRO) and was run across multiple teams and departments at the University. Library and Cultural Services took over the running of the journal in Autumn 2019. From this date, the journal was moved to a new publishing platform hosted by Janeway, an open source scholarly



HANNAH CRAGO

Open Research  
Development  
Librarian  
University of Essex

'the *Essex Student Journal* prides itself on being a journal run by students, for students'

2 publishing platform.<sup>5</sup> The platform has both an outward-facing website and a dashboard behind the scenes that enables the publishing process to run smoothly and efficiently. This has proven essential for the journal's success and has allowed for a much more efficient publishing process. For example, prior to using the journal platform, article submissions were managed via e-mail in an ad hoc way, with no clear workflows in place. Using the journal platform has transformed this process, as authors, reviewers and editors use the platform at all stages of the publication process, allowing a transparent, efficient and timely workflow.

## How the *Essex Student Journal* works

The journal is open for submissions year-round, and any specific calls for papers do not have set end dates. Deadlines are set for reviewers and authors during the publication process, but there is a high level of flexibility as the competing demands on students' time are appreciated. Publication with the *Essex Student Journal* should be a positive learning experience for authors and reviewers, and not seen as a burden on their time. As such, frequent conversations are had with both authors and reviewers to ensure the benefits of working with the journal are felt.

The journal is multi-disciplinary, so articles are published across all subject areas studied at the University. The breadth of content published by the journal is clear, as 12 of the University's 18 departments currently have published authors. This is across all three faculties, and includes authors from Health and Social Care, Philosophy and Art History and Economics, to name just three. This subject spread illustrates the wide reach of the *Essex Student Journal* as a multi-disciplinary journal,

Articles can also be submitted in various formats. Primarily, these formats are research articles, essays and case studies, but suggestions from students are also welcomed. For example, alternative formats could, and in some cases do, include creative writing, academic blog posts or poetry. To date, essays have proven by far the most popular submission, with 75% of the articles published since relaunch in this format. This is somewhat expected, as authors are primarily encouraged to submit versions of assignments that tend to be essays. However, as the journal expands its reach, the intention is that the variety of publication formats will increase.

Operating under a double-blind peer review process, author and reviewer anonymity is vital for the journal's success due to the small pool of authors and reviewers. With all members of the publishing process being from the same institution, and likely to be from the same department, it is important that any biases are kept away from the peer review process. As such, the Editor and management team behind the journal remain the only individuals aware of the identity of the authors until publication. The identity of the reviewers remains anonymous even after publication. This is somewhat in contrast to the premise of open research in terms of making the peer review process more open, however, to protect the authors and reviewers it seems a compromise worth making.

## The aims of the *Essex Student Journal*

One of the journal's key aims is to introduce early career researchers to publishing. This includes undergraduates, and both postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. Introducing students to publishing early in their careers ensures that they see publishing as open to everyone, and feel their work is worthy of being published. This contrasts with usual practice in academia, whereby students' work is often submitted for internal assessment and marking but is then rarely read or reviewed again. In providing students with an outlet for their work, they gain pride in their writing and become more confident in expressing their views. On speaking to students, this is one of the key attractions for publishing with the *Essex Student Journal*.

'there is a high level of flexibility as the competing demands on students' time are appreciated'

'author and reviewer anonymity is vital for the journal's success due to the small pool of authors and reviewers'

'Introducing students to publishing early in their careers ensures that they see publishing as open to everyone, and feel their work is worthy of being published'

3 More specifically, another aim is to make more research available open access. This aim underlines the work of the University of Essex' Research Services team more generally, meaning that the *Essex Student Journal* helps to ensure students are supported in this ambition from the outset of their research careers. By providing an early experience of open access publishing, it helps to establish the idea of open research practices as the norm for academic publishing.

As our students of today are our researchers of tomorrow, the *Essex Student Journal* provides a key opportunity to educate our future researchers about publishing in general, and open access in particular. This is achieved through training sessions and guidance materials, as diamond open access is discussed and explained both in terms of how it works and the benefits it brings. This knowledge gives more confidence to our future researchers to strive for open access for their work going forward. While it is early days yet for many of our authors in terms of their potential future publishing careers, we have seen an early success story via our previous Student Journal Editor who recently published their first open access article.<sup>6</sup>

'it helps to establish the idea of open research practices as the norm for academic publishing'

A final aim for the journal is to advocate for diamond open access more broadly than amongst our own authors, reviewers and editors. For example, when promoting the journal to academic colleagues, a clear opportunity to advocate for diamond open access also presents itself. This is true across all levels of the University. When engaged in strategic discussions amongst the directors of both Education and Research, as well as their pro-vice-chancellors, consideration of, and discussion about, the *Essex Student Journal* has been included. Furthermore, module leaders have also been keen to promote the journal to their students, both through lectures and in assignment feedback. This engagement with the journal across all levels of staff enables academic colleagues not only to see the benefits of diamond open access for their students' work, but for their own publications too.

## Benefits brought by the *Essex Student Journal*

The benefits for the managerial team working with the journal reflect the themes discussed so far. In making more research available open access, an increasing number of early career researchers can experience the benefits of diamond open access first hand. At the same time, the journal provides an example of good practice around running a diamond open access journal, thus acting as a bottom-up approach that aims to go some way to help transform assumptions and expectations for the publishing landscape.

For authors, publishing an article at undergraduate or postgraduate taught level is beneficial for their CV. This is true whether they plan to go onto further study or to apply for jobs after graduation. As well as this, having an article reviewed and gaining feedback from peers in this way helps to improve their writing and research skills. These skills will not only help with future assignments but are also highly transferable to the workplace. One example of this is in adapting an assignment originally written for an expert audience, their module leader, to instead be aimed at a general audience with little or no subject knowledge. To be able to write professionally but in clear, understandable language is something our authors have reflected positively upon in personal reflections within the 'Big Essex Award'.<sup>7</sup> With this reflection on skills development in mind, authors have also explained in informal conversations with our editorial team that their self-confidence has increased following publication with the journal. Part of this self-confidence comes from the articles being widely available online. Where authors can see their article indexed within Google Scholar, alongside the number of times it is downloaded and shared on social media, this contributes toward a feeling of pride and success. Open access plays a key part in this, as it allows a wider reach than would be possible under a subscription model.<sup>8</sup>

'authors have ... explained ... that their self-confidence has increased following publication with the journal'

- 4 Reviewers also see wide-reaching benefits through volunteering with the journal. Firstly, postgraduate researchers gain invaluable experience of the peer review process. For postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers, training or support for initial experiences of peer review is usually not offered. The *Essex Student Journal* therefore provides a crucial first experience of peer review in a safe space, with lots of support and guidance available. Additionally, experiencing peer review also helps reviewers to improve their scholarly, research and teaching skills. In analysing others' work, this enables our reviewers to become more critical of their own writing, and provides key analytical skills that help with teaching and self-reflection. One reviewer recently provided a reflection of their time reviewing with the journal. Figure 1 shows a Tweet sent from the journal's Twitter (now known as X) account including this reflection, highlighting some of the benefits the reviewer gained.

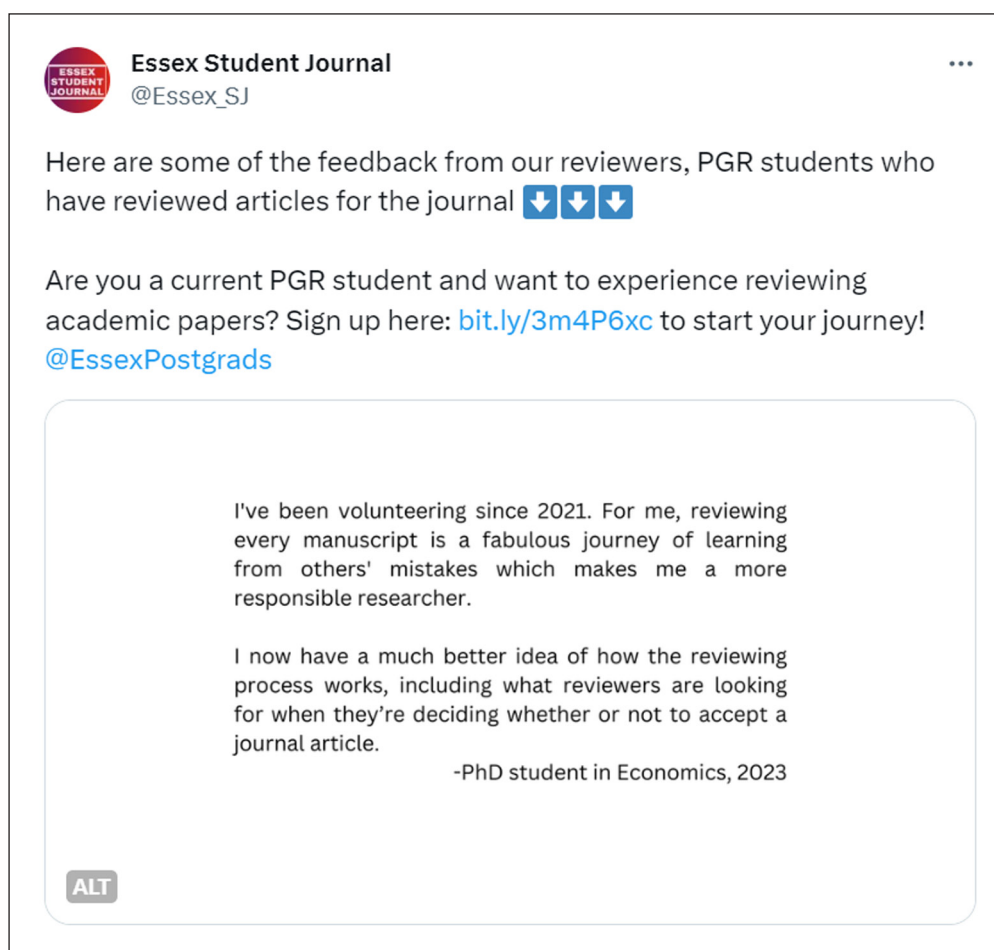


Figure 1. Tweet from @Essex\_SJ, April 12, 2023

## Promotion and outreach

To achieve the widest possible impact for the *Essex Student Journal*, promotion and outreach have been, and continue to be, essential. A variety of methods have been used for promotion and outreach, including social media, news stories, departmental visits and running stalls on the University's campus at 'Welcome' events. Social media activity has primarily included Twitter (now known as X) and Facebook accounts dedicated to the journal and has also been extended to a LinkedIn group for authors and reviewers. Whilst follower numbers have steadily increased, especially on Twitter (now known as X) with approximately 550 followers at the time of writing, for the most part engagement has been fairly low. However, we have seen that sharing publications alongside photos and information about the author has brought better engagement, and therefore intend to continue to do this, assuming Twitter (now known as X) remains a viable platform. As an example of this, the most engaged-with Tweet sent in 2023 from the journal's account prior to this article being written, had had 21 likes and 12 retweets, see Figure 2. While the post was viewed by over 3,700

- 5 people and gained a good number of likes and retweets, more work is needed to ensure the *Essex Student Journal's* social media platforms are focused on engagement rather than promotional messaging alone.



Figure 2. Tweet from (@Essex\_SJ, March 27, 2023)

Promotion and outreach are also achieved via news stories within the journal's website.

These news stories are generally written by the Editor, or other members of the managerial team. Since relaunching the journal in October 2020, 21 news stories have been published. These are all available via the website.<sup>9</sup> News stories are used to provide information, promote calls for papers and encourage submissions in certain topics. In some cases, these news stories have tied in with events or holidays, for example International Women's Day, or Black History Month. In using news stories in this way, a 'voice' is given to the journal to show there are people behind it, and this subsequently brings further engagement.

'in this way, a 'voice' is given to the journal to show there are people behind it, and this subsequently brings further engagement'

Engagement has proven most fruitful when in person. For example, the journal strives to have a presence at many University-wide events such as the Freshers' Fair and a skills event known as 'Skills Fest'. In enabling conversations with students directly, in-person events such as these provide a key platform for student engagement and allow a

6 wider audience to be reached. In addition, they allow questions to be answered about the journal and provide an opportunity for the management team and journal editor to better establish where any lack of clarity remains.

## Future plans

Since relaunching the *Essex Student Journal* in 2020, 21 articles have been published across two full issues, with a third issue under way at the time of writing. Viewing figures are strong for the publications, with the most popular article<sup>10</sup> in the most recent issue prior to writing receiving close to 600 views, and approximately 70 downloads. There have been four student journal editors since the University of Essex' Library and Cultural Services took over the journal, and there are approximately 90 postgraduate researchers signed up as reviewers. In addition, articles have been digitized and converted to accessible formats from previous issues of ESTRO. It is clear from this information that the *Essex Student Journal* has been working well, and the intention is to continue to grow.

During 2023, the journal began the process of publishing its first special issue. This is on the theme of equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI), and outreach work has been done to promote this special issue. This has included collaborating with the Students' Union, and circulating a presentation slide to leaders of modules on topics focusing on EDI so that students on these modules can be encouraged to publish their work.

Another special issue is planned for the 2023/24 academic year, with the theme likely to be around sustainability. Both EDI and sustainability are key issues at the University of Essex, as both students and researchers have expressed concern around the themes. In this way, the aim is to give students a platform to speak about issues they feel are vital.

'the aim is to give students a platform to speak about issues they feel are vital'

Further plans are also in place to host an *Essex Student Journal* conference during the academic year 2023/24. The idea for this is to provide an opportunity for the authors of articles published in the journal to present their work to an audience of staff and students. In doing so, our journal's authors will gain invaluable experience of conference presenting early in their academic careers, extending the experience of academic publishing they gain with the *Essex Student Journal* beyond the publication itself. The conference would also serve as a further opportunity to widen the journal's reach and to encourage more submissions.

A final plan in place at the time of writing is to continue to grow diamond open access at the University of Essex and beyond. The aim is that as the *Essex Student Journal* continues to grow, demonstrating the benefits and possibilities of diamond open access, this growth will help to convince senior leaders that diamond open access is worthy of investment. This buy-in from senior leaders could lead to broader developments, from financial contributions to more alternative methods of open access publication, to the potential to develop an Essex University Press. Whatever the future may hold for diamond open access at the University of Essex, the *Essex Student Journal* will have played a key part in paving the way.

'The *Essex Student Journal* has become so much more than an outlet for students' work'

## Conclusion

The *Essex Student Journal* has become so much more than an outlet for students' work here at the University of Essex. Since its relaunch in 2020, it has introduced students at all stages of their university education to the publishing process and has provided essential first-hand experience of the benefits of diamond open access publishing. Through demonstrating the successes possible with diamond open access amongst students, the journal has also become a key advocacy tool for diamond open access amongst researchers and academic staff at all stages of their careers. As the journal continues to grow, it is hoped this impact will extend to enable a wider investment in diamond open access across the University of Essex, and hopefully beyond.

### Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

### Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

### References

1. Aisling Tierney et al., "Development and delivery of a multidisciplinary student-led research journal at the University of Bristol," *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership, and Change* 8, no. 1 (2022), <https://journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/1089> (accessed 30 October 2023).
2. "Student Journals," UCL, <https://student-journals.ucl.ac.uk/journals/> (accessed 30 October 2023).
3. "Student Research Journal," University of Bristol, <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/bilt/student-engagement/student-research-journal/> (accessed 30 October 2023).
4. "The Elphinstone Review: Our student-led academic journal," University of Aberdeen, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/socsci/research/elphinstone-review-684.php> (accessed 30 October 2023).
5. Martin Paul Eve and Andy Byers, "Janeway: a scholarly communications platform," *Insights* 31, no. 15 (2018): 1–4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.396> (accessed 30 October 2023).
6. Dafni Kalatzi Pantera, Tobias Böhmelt, and Zorzeta Bakaki, "The transnational influence of natural disasters on environmental attitudes," *European Journal of Political Research* 63, no.3 (2022): 761–780, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12572> (accessed 30 October 2023).
7. "Chart My Path and the Big Essex Award," University of Essex, <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/careers/chart-my-path> (accessed 30 October 2023).
8. Philip M. Davis, "Open access, readership, citations: a randomized controlled trial of scientific journal publishing," *FASEB Journal* 25, no. 7 (2011): 2129–2134, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1096/fj.11-183988> (accessed 30 October 2023).
9. "News," *Essex Student Journal*, <https://publications.essex.ac.uk/esj/news/> (accessed 30 October 2023).
10. Luke David Wheeler, "Why is cancer so hard to cure?," *Essex Student Journal* 14, no. 1 (2023), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5526/esj164> (accessed 30 October 2023).

**Article copyright: © 2023 Hannah Crago. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](#), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.**



Corresponding author:

Hannah Crago

Open Research Development Librarian

University of Essex, UK

E-mail: [h.crago@essex.ac.uk](mailto:h.crago@essex.ac.uk)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6325-2975>

To cite this article:

Crago H, "The Essex Student Journal: demonstrating the benefits of diamond open access across the University of Essex and beyond," *Insights*, 2023, 36: 25, 1–8; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.637>

Submitted on 29 June 2023

Accepted on 08 August 2023

Published on 12 December 2023

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press.