

# Then & Now: Arts at Warwick Introduction

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**Editorial review:** This article has been subject to an editorial review process



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## Abstract

*This introduction provides an overview of the Then & Now: Arts at Warwick special issue. It outlines the origins of the Then & Now project and how the issue was developed in collaboration between staff and students. To highlight the distinctive contributions of this issue to existing research on the history of Higher Education and the student experience, it also provides a brief summary of the historiography in this field.*

**Keywords:** Arts; humanities; student experience; student-led research; student co-creation; University of Warwick

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In his book *The Plateglass Universities*, Michael Beloff wrote that in the new universities like Warwick that were established in the 1960s, students ‘had a vital role in creating the pattern of life within the university, and in establishing their own campus in the community of universities’. He went on:

*It was a peculiar experience for the first generation, demanding, in a university context, a quality equivalent to Patriotism. Their courses were untested and experimental. Rules and conventions were designed in the barest of brushwork. Buildings were half-finished. There were few regular meeting places. None of the apparatus of ordinary student life was at hand. There was no union, no newspaper, no societies, no sports clubs. If University education is really what one remembers when one has forgotten what has been taught, then the first Plateglass students were largely self-educated (Beloff, 1968: 56).*

The origin of this special issue was the student co-produced *Then & Now: Arts at Warwick* project, which ran at the University of Warwick from January to August 2020 (Warwick, 2020a). This project took place in collaboration between academic staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students from the Faculty of Arts, archivists from the Modern Records Centre, and alumni. The project was situated within the tradition described by Beloff: students played a vital role, it took place against the backdrop of the construction (in this case the new Faculty of Arts Building), and it was experimental in theoretical approach, method, and implementation. Most traditionally of all, the project required belief and commitment from the students involved, especially in the face of the significant and unparalleled challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What the project aimed to achieve was clearly articulated by one of the undergraduate project team members, Malina Mihalache, in an article on the project that she published in *Art Space Magazine* in spring 2020. On behalf of all the students involved, Malina wrote:

*Through this project we seek to create a retrospective on the evolution of the arts at Warwick, whilst highlighting specific moments that are of interest. This is all the more fascinating as the research is conducted by current students from the university, which gives it a contemporary and interesting perspective (Mihalache, 2002: 16-17).*

As Malina described, it was undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the arts disciplines at the University of Warwick who made the *Then & Now* project. These same students have been responsible for contributing the content which comprises this issue. Both have been made in their own image. This issue is an embodied expression of their talents, skills, and achievements. The topics it considers reflect issues pertinent to

current students. In a piece published in Warwick's student newspaper *The Boar* in July 2020, the project's student social media lead Eilidh McKell wrote: 'one of the great pros of the project has been the freedom to creatively explore our own interests' (McKell, 2020). A great example of this is the *Afterimage* visual art series created by artist and project member Madeleine Snowdon. Her series of images overlay photographic images of the Humanities Building – the original and current home of Warwick's Arts Faculty – with images of the new Faculty of Arts Building, which was under construction during the period of this project. Employing a totally different approach, another member of the project team, Emma Lovell, conducted a statistical analysis of numbers of degree courses offered in the Arts Faculty from 1965 to 2017 (fig.1).

For almost all of the student contributors whose work is showcased here, this is their first experience of academic publishing. These articles were developed in addition to their main course of study. The research they have produced is of remarkable quality. In this issue the undergraduate student's articles are positioned alongside the work of established academics and postgraduate students, mirroring the spirit of co-creation that underpinned the *Then & Now* project. Collectively the pieces of writing contained in this issue push approaches to student research and understandings of the history of the student experience in a range of new and innovative directions.



Figure 1: Scatter graph of the number of undergraduate degree courses per year offered to prospective students 1965-2018 (Warwick, 2020b)

This issue represents the academic culmination of the *Then & Now* project. It also contributes to the history of the student experience of Higher Education. Despite some notable exceptions, such as Harold and Pamela Silver's *Students: Changing Roles, Changing Lives* (1997), this remains a neglected area of historical research. In the main, research into the history of Higher Education continues to focus on its political dimensions

(Stevens, 2004) and architectural spaces (Pellew & Taylor, 2020). This issue seeks to address this historical lacuna by exploring how students have shaped student life and learning at the University of Warwick from the 1960s to present. It aims to unlock the student experience from analysis of archival records and oral history interviews with current and former students and staff. It also examines how Warwick's art and architectural heritage has shaped the student experience, and the extra-curricular sides of student life - socialising, sports and societies, student politics - which contribute so much to the vibrancy of Warwick's campus. As almost all of the research has been conducted by students and staff from arts and humanities disciplines, there is a particular focus on the historical experiences and contributions of arts and humanities students.

The history of the student experience is explored in two main ways in this issue. Firstly, traditional academic articles and interview transcripts explore themes such as the history of higher education, the arts, and student experience. Secondly, case studies and reflections by the student participants on their experiences of the project illuminate different aspects and themes of the *Then & Now* project. The research presented offers an important student-led view of the history of the student experience and illustrates the connections, similarities, and differences between students' experiences 'then' and 'now'.

In terms of source material, the *Then & Now* project investigated material artefacts and documentary evidence from the Modern Records Centre Archives and Warwick's Student Union Archives. Included among these evidence bases were student newspapers, such as *Campus* and *The Boar*, magazines like Warwick's early 1990s feminist magazine *Cobwebs*, the Student Unions' alternative prospectus series, and official university prospectuses and handbooks. Further evidence included photographs, architectural drawings, and films of student life on campus since the 1960s. The project's student research team also conducted interviews with staff and past and present students about their experiences at Warwick. Of particular note, amidst the COVID-19 lockdown in April and May 2020, the team undertook interviews where they asked participants to reflect on their experiences of remote learning and lockdown life during the pandemic. This material will serve as an archive of this unique historical moment for the future. The source material examined by the project was thus highly diverse, as were the students' diverse responses to it. It is fair to say that this project was exploratory rather than extensive in its approach to its sources.

This issue clearly demonstrates the value of student co-creation (Bovill, 2013), to teaching and learning, but also to research and public engagement. Students bring to research and public engagement fresh approaches and ideas. For example, this project has shown students to be particularly skilled in public engagement activities online, as well as in engaging the student and non-academic 'public'. The *Then & Now* project's Instagram page – entirely managed by the students - has been particularly successful in engaging past and present students, boasting 444 followers at the time of writing (Warwick, 2021). Elizabeth Wood, an archivist from the Modern Records Centre who supported this project, wrote in her reflective account for the exhibition website that 'the *Then & Now* project is a strong testament to its student-led methodology, and we have been so impressed by the professionalism of the students involved'. By working on the project and contributing to this issue, the students involved have transcended the traditional teaching and learning arena. They have taken part in research activities from which undergraduates, and even postgraduates, are often excluded. Academics and academic professionals have much to learn and gain from including students in research and public engagement activities more routinely and creatively.

This project has illustrated that being able to actively participate in and shape research and public engagement activities can greatly enhance the student experience. During the project's development, the student Digital Team manager, Elena Ruikyte, reflected: 'I'm very excited to be part of this project, as it [has] enabled me to implement my knowledge and skills, to exchange ideas, to experience flowing creativity and to build hopefully long-lasting relations with other students and staff members'. As is clear from so many of the *Then & Now* project's outputs, engaging and including students in diverse areas of academia can also help with the creation of learning community, enabling student voice, and developing feelings of connectedness and belonging.

The articles contained in this issue explore a diverse range of themes from the history of educational philosophy, to campus art and architecture, to pedagogic methods and approaches to oral history. Taken together, the content is a powerful embodiment of student voice. Readers can potentially learn a lot about current students from what historical aspects of the student experience the student contributors have chosen to study and how they have approached their research. At the same time, along with the project's online exhibition, the pieces of writing presented here underline the significant contribution students can make to academia not just as learners but as producers of knowledge, too. Indeed, one of the most striking findings made by the student researchers on this project was the recurring desire - across successive generations of arts students - to shape the campus and the university; to make Warwick *their* university

through activism and politics, sports and societies, and the day-to-day routines of student life. The project has, in turn, given its student participants a chance to shape their university through research. We hope that you enjoy reading the articles included in this special issue and that they deepen your understanding of the student experience ‘then’ and ‘now’. We also hope that they inspire you to develop and participate in academic activities that blur the borders between teaching, research and public engagement, and that involve elements of student co-creation.

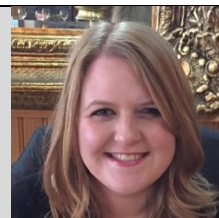
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## Acknowledgements

We first of all wish to thank Liz Wood and Melissa Downing from the Modern Records Centre for their unwavering support for this project throughout its lifecycle. We equally wish to extend our thanks to the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning for funding the project, and Warwick’s Student Union for giving us access to their archives. We are also grateful for the support and encouragement provided by our Faculty colleagues Penny Roberts, Diana Stonefield, and Rebecca Stone. We would also like to thank the *Exchanges* journal Editor-in-Chief Gareth J Johnson for the invaluable support he has provided to us and the students throughout the journal publication process.

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[Pierre Botcherby](#) is a PhD candidate in the University of Warwick’s history department. His thesis studies the impact of de-industrialisation and (post-industrial) regeneration on community via a case study of St. Helens (Merseyside). He is also Administrative Assistant for the [Warwick Oral History Network](#). Pierre has been a seminar tutor for 3 years, holds Associate Fellow status of Advance HE, and is a Student Fellow of the Warwick



International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA). He was joint Project Officer for 'Then & Now' and is currently the Student Experience Intern for the Faculty of Arts where he is responsible for the [Student Research Portfolio](#).

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## List of Figures

**Figure 1:** Scatter Graph of the Number of Undergraduate Degree Courses per Year Offered to Prospective Students 1965-2018. (**Warwick, 2020b**)

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**To cite this article:**

Woods, K., & Botcherby, P., 2021. Article Title: Subtitle also goes here.  
*Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 8(4), 1-8. Available at:  
[https://doi.org/ 10.31273/eirj.v8i4.796](https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v8i4.796)