Then & Now Arts at Warwick Student Project: Co-creation in the COVID-19 crisis

Kathryn Woods[1], Pierre Botcherby[2]

[1]Goldsmiths, University of London; [2]University of Warwick
Correspondence: [1]K.woods@gold.ac.uk; [2]p.botcherby@warwick.ac.uk
Twitter: [1]@kathryn_a_woods
ORCID: [1]0000-0003-0657-6409

Abstract

This article overviews the 'Then & Now: Arts at Warwick' student-led research and public engagement project that took place at the University of Warwick from January to August 2020. It discusses the methods of student co-creation and student-led research that underpinned the project and provides a detailed description of the pedagogic practices employed. The value and challenges of student co-creation are examined alongside the experience of managing a complex project in the crisis situation of COVID-19. The project's impact in building learning community and enhancing the student academic experience is evaluated, and critical commentary is provided on some aspects of the project's design. This article demonstrates the benefits of utilising digital technology for the facilitation of student co-creation in the arenas of research and public engagement, and for the development of learning that enables students to participate in 'real life' academic activities and shape the pedagogic approaches that are used in their teaching.

Keywords: University of Warwick; Co-Creation; Student Led-Research; Student Engagement; COVID-19

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Introduction

Then & Now: *Arts at Warwick* was an experimental student-led research and public engagement project run by the University of Warwick's Arts Faculty from January to August 2020. The project brought together undergraduate and postgraduate students, archivists from the Modern Records Centre (MRC), alumni, and academic staff. It explored the evolution of the Arts at Warwick from 1965 to the present and compared student experiences 'then' and 'now'. The project aimed to trial new approaches and methods of student co-creation, student-led research, and public engagement. It also sought to foster a sense of learning community for the Arts Faculty, as well as provide students with the opportunity to undertake interdisciplinary learning and develop new skills through 'real life' academic research, exhibition curation, and public engagement activities. Student engagement in the project was entirely voluntary. This article provides a reflective account of the project as a pedagogic intervention from the perspective of its two academic leads: Dr Kathryn Woods (Director of Student Experience for Arts), who conceived and led the project until April 2020, and Pierre Botcherby (PhD candidate in History), who led the project from April 2020 until its competition in August 2020. The article demonstrates the value of the *Then & Now* project in creating learning community for students, especially when studying at distance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the project's team of staff and student co-creators managed and evolved the project in this challenging context.

Then & Now's inspiration was the construction of Warwick's new Faculty of Arts Building, due for completion in 2021. This move represents a significant change for the Arts Faculty which has been housed in the Humanities Building since 1970. Among other things, the transition to the new building, featuring a range of new 'open' learning spaces and bringing all the Faculty's departments under one roof, aims to foster a greater sense of learning community and promote interdisciplinarity. In advance of this move, *Then & Now* aimed to celebrate the history of Warwick's Arts Faculty and stimulate collective thinking about its future through critical analysis of its past. It sought to empower today's students to take an active role in shaping the next chapter in the Faculty's history by encouraging them to reflect – and communicate and evidence to others – the various ways that past generations of Warwick students have been involved in making the Faculty and the University what they are today. Warwick University's strategic promotion of student co-creation and student-led research also provided inspiration for the project.

The project equally sought to redress the traditional silencing of student voice within institutional and educational histories that have tended to focus on the politics of institutions and education in the post-war period, and ignore 'grassroot' student archives, cultures, and histories. This is a trend that has continued in a recent wave of 'new' educational histories, despite calls by the likes of Gary McCulloch and Tom Woodin for the development of a new social history of learners and learning (**2010**). A key aim for *Then & Now* was thus to develop a student history 'from below' that focused on grassroot student experiences and student archives, and involved students in the making of their own history. Connected to this, it was considered important for the project to encourage students to rediscover parts of Warwick's history that may have been forgotten, deliberately obscured, or underemphasised within established histories. As the site of the 1960s student-management disputes documented by E.P. Thompson in Warwick University Ltd, a foundational text in critical university studies, Warwick provides an excellent case study for exploring the student side of the ongoing and polarised debate over the rise of the 'neo-liberal university' (**Vernon, 2018**). Warwick also made a good case study due to its history of leadership in the development of new pedagogies, including the concept of 'student as producer' that was developed by Mike Neary when he was lead of the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at Warwick 2004-2007 (**Neary & Winn, 2009**).

Then & Now at once sought to collapse the hierarchies that often exist between university staff and postgraduate and undergraduate students, and create closer symbiosis between academic teaching and learning, research, and public engagement. The project trialled new public engagement approaches by engaging the 'public' – current students, staff, and alumni – through all stages of the project life cycle. *Then & Now* was especially innovative in enabling students to take responsibility for the project's overall direction, planning, research questions, and outputs. As the project's academic 'leads', our primary roles involved starting the project, facilitating its administration, and supporting the students in achieving their aims, mainly through academic guidance and mentoring. In allowing decision making power to be gradually transferred to the students as the project progressed and enabling them to co-produce the pedagogies employed through reflexive practice, *Then & Now* tested the partnership model – most commonly used in staff-student co-creation projects – and operated around the highest rungs of Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' (**Arnstein, 1969**).

The article reflects on the benefits of student co-creation and initiatives that empower students to take leading roles in arenas of academic activity beyond traditionally conceived teaching and learning. It discusses how the methods employed by *Then & Now*, and the contexts in which it took

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place, encouraged the student participants to progressively assume power and autonomy over the project's management. The article begins by outlining the project's background and initial aims, before providing a discussion of its process and methods. It ends with an overview of the project's outputs and legacy. In producing this article, Kathryn focused on the project background, theory, and aims, whilst Pierre focused on the processes, methods, outputs, and evaluation. This approach mirrors our different roles in the project. This piece aims to support student co-creation in academic research, pedagogy, and public and student engagement, by showing how digital technology and digital learning environments (which have become more commonly used since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic) can usefully blur the boundaries between these knowledge arenas and activities, and create a space that students can enter, relatively easily, as learning partners and producers, as well as communicators of knowledge (**Bagga-Gupta, Dalberg & Lindberg, 2019**).

Theoretical Approaches

Then & Now's approaches to student engagement were informed by theories of co-creation and student-led research that have emerged since 2000. Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten define co-creation as a 'collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (**2014: 6-7**). Co-creation approaches deliberately collapse traditional hierarchical arrangements between teachers and learners, repositioning both as joint learners and creators of knowledge (**Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018**). In recent years, Warwick's senior management have expressed a sustained desire to embed co-creation into every education practice (**Warwick Education Strategy, 2018**). This has been supported by institutional bodies such as the Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) and the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA). In practice, multiple understandings of what constitutes student co-creation exist simultaneously. Most student co-creation projects involve students as 'partners': 'power is […] redistributed through negotiation between citizens and powerholders' who 'agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities' (**Arnstein, 1969: 216-7**). *Then & Now* was initially conceived as partnership project. As the project developed, however, it felt natural to give students a greater role in the project's planning and management and the pedagogies employed. Student participation in the project thereby moved upwards on the 'ladder of participation', towards positions of 'delegated power' and 'citizen level' control (**1969: 216-7**).

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Then & Now's development was also informed by theories of research-led teaching and student-led research (**Zamorski, 2002**). In 2005, the Council of Undergraduate Research and the National Conference on Undergraduate Research declared undergraduate research as 'the pedagogy for the 21st Century' (**Walkington, 2015: 4**). As Walkington notes, definitions of student research encompass a broad church of interpretations, including everything from project work and dissertations to paid internships. It can also include arrangements where 'students are supervised by postgraduate students rather than academic staff, or work in teams including staff, graduate students, and undergraduates' (**Ibid: 10**). It is this latter approach which best encapsulates *Then & Now*'s co-creation ambitions. The project was equally shaped by the concept of 'student as producer'. This pedagogic concept evolved in the 2010s and identified technology and digital scholarship as key enablers for student led-research and supporting changes to the relationship between tutor and student that underlie research-engaged teaching, including through facilitating students' communication with each other, partners, and communities across multiple sites, both on and off campus (**Neary et al., 2010: 12-13**).

Like student co-creation, student led-research involves different levels of student participation. Walkington has identified five different categories or levels student participation. *Then & Now* was initially conceived to operate at level three: 'staff initiated, decisions shared with students'. At level three, 'staff frame the enquiry initially but students have a much greater role to play in decision-making with respect to development of methods, reframing, determining courses of action and taking responsibility for the outcomes and dissemination' (**Walkington, 2015: 10**). For example, when the project began students were not provided with specific research questions or expected projects outputs, only suggestions. This allowed the students to adapt the project according to their own interests and assume responsibility over its research questions and outputs.

At the same time, student participants were encouraged to develop their own research agendas and outputs connected to the project theme. As the project progressed, many of the students acted more independently, either working alone or in small groups, and started to engage at levels four and five of student participation. Level four student-led research participation is defined as 'student initiated and directed'. An example of this from the project are the 'isolation diaries', which the students developed and worked on almost entirely independently in response to COVID-19. Level five, meanwhile, is defined as where 'students initiate the research for themselves, but all of this is done in consultation with university staff at a level determined by the student'. A prime example of

this from *Then & Now* is Malina Mihalache's article about the project, independently published in Art Space magazine (**Mihlalache, 2020**). Therefore, although *Then & Now* initially engaged students as partners, it also created opportunities for students to act more independently and develop their own independent research agendas within it. As is discussed below, over the duration of the project this enabled students to assume greater power over the project's overall management and reflexively shape the pedagogies employed.

Process: January to March 2020

At the start of the project, undergraduate and postgraduate student participants were recruited from across Warwick's Arts Faculty. There was no limit on numbers or formal recruitment process, beyond asking students to express interest via email. Nineteen students from seven departments came forwards: seven from History of Art, six from the Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, and the rest from across the departments of History, Modern Languages, Global Sustainable Development, Film and Television Studies, and Politics and International Studies. This recruitment of students from different departments and with different skillsets was considered important to facilitating the interdisciplinary and learning community development aims of the project.

The project was run through regular weekly meetings on Wednesday afternoons. These sessions were held in the MRC to familiarise the students with the university archives. Liz Wood from the MRC attended all of the project's early meetings and ran parts of sessions to introduce the students to the MRC's archival holdings and methods of conducting archival research. Melissa Downing, the MRC public engagement lead, also attended meetings to provide guidance on developing public engagement initiatives. Most meetings began with updates from us and the student participants. This gave the meetings and the project a coherent structure week-to-week. As project leads, we directed the meetings by responding to the students' updates or set the students particular tasks to report back on and work on during the meetings. In the second half of meetings, students could talk with us and our MRC colleagues either one-on-one or in small groups, work individually or in small groups, or consult archival holdings. At the end of each meeting, we identified actions for the next session. A Microsoft Teams space was created to facilitate communication, information sharing, and ongoing engagement between sessions. Students were encouraged to start using this space by sharing a blurb 'about them', their interests, and what they wanted to get out of the project, and to connect with others who expressed similar interests. This set up the

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expectation that dialogue should flow between the students outside the weekly meetings via the Teams virtual learning space.

Early in the project the students organised themselves into three smaller sub-teams: Digital, Interview, and Research. Within these teams, the students played different roles and selected their own leaders. The Digital Team focused on developing a social media and marketing strategy. They also led planning for the exhibition. This was the largest team and members often worked on sub-projects in pairs or small groups. The Research Team focused on archival materials held in the MRC, the Student Union, and the university's Mead Gallery. Members of this team often worked independently (alone or in pairs) and with the least supervision from us as the project leads. The Interview Team were tasked with interviewing former and current students to uncover the personal side of student experience. This team worked more closely with us than the other two teams because of the complexities of identifying interviewees and negotiating the University's Research Ethics Committee. Pierre – whose research utilises oral history – was initially introduced to the project in March to support the Interview Team.

By late spring term, the collaborative approach was bearing fruit. The Digital Team had developed a timeline counting down to the exhibition launch, a framework to manage the project's progress, a launch event plan, and a social media style guide and project logo to ensure professional-looking marketing. The Research Team were well underway with their archival research and had uploaded a range of photographs of archival material on the project's Teams space. They had also each identified their areas and questions of research. With the assistance of the Research Team, the Interview Team had identified their interview questions for research participants. They had also successfully submitted a research ethics application and started working with alumni, fundraising, and friends and family to identify research participants. Around this time a notable shift was apparent among the student cohort, where they were increasingly comfortable working together and friendships started to emerge. In February the whole team took part in a half-day workshop to plan the layout and main themes that would be included in the physical exhibition.

Process: Post March 2020 and During the COVID-19 Lockdown

In March 2020, project work was disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown and emergency remote teaching measures. The lockdown caused widespread teaching upheaval and moving to an online-based model of learning was challenging for staff and students (**Batty and Hall, 2020; Czerniewicz et al.**

2020). The project's weekly meetings were quickly moved online to Microsoft Teams, which the students were already familiar with as the main project communication hub. This was relatively simple, and our experience aligns with research that has suggested teaching and learning that already involved use of digital learning environments made a more effective transition to wholly digital learning during the pandemic (**Czerniewicz et al. 2020; Hodges et al., 2020**). Although a small number of students (around three) left the project at this stage, the majority of students continued. This hinted at how far the students had become invested in the project and felt responsible for its overall success by this stage. At several of the online meetings the students noted how the project helped them feel connected and supported during the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, in many ways the COVID-19 situation seemed to strengthen the project's learning community and increase the sense of project ownership among the students. It was also early in the lockdown that students began to develop their own ideas for research and outputs, such as the isolation diaries and the online launch event.

Another challenge occurred in April when Kathryn, as project lead, left the university for a new job. We were concerned about the potentially destabilising effect of this change, especially in the COVID-19 context. In reality, this shift seemed to encourage the students to take greater leadership over the project and find greater freedom within it. It is noteworthy that after Kathryn's departure the project became essentially entirely student-led, as Pierre was still a postgraduate student at this time. Although hard to prove, it is likely that without Kathryn's departure the students would not have felt so confident in taking the reigns over its management in its latter stages. After leaving, Kathryn continued to operate as an active 'friend' to the project, which would have been challenging had the project not moved to an online learning environment due to her having physically relocated for her job.

COVID-19 also produced a range of challenges for the delivery of the project. The first was the necessary cancellation of the physical exhibition. Relatively quickly, the students decided the best solution was to focus on developing an online exhibition and launch event. There had always been plans to develop a basic website to accompany the exhibition, but an entirely online exhibition required something more sophisticated. To lead this work, a new Website Team was formed to collate the different teams' findings and populate the site pages. The Research Team faced challenges as they could no longer access physical archives, limiting their research to materials they already had and digital resources. That said, the MRC staff were incredibly helpful in scanning material and sending it to students where possible. The biggest change for the Interview Team was that they could not meet people in person. Instead, they decided to conduct their

interviews through Skype. Although this created some challenges, it was this shift that also created the opportunity for the Team to develop the isolation video diaries; an element of the project that used digital media to effectively blur the boundaries between the creation and dissemination of knowledge in ways that Bagga-Gupta et al describe as characteristic of virtual learning (**2019**).

Another challenge with operating online was the potential for inequality in students' participation in group meetings due to issues of technology access, connectivity, access to appropriate spaces to participate in meetings, and variations in digital literacy (**Czerniewicz et al., 2020**). The students also showed different levels of confidence in engaging online. This risked creating a sense of hierarchy, where some voices are allowed to be 'louder' than others, which co-creation seeks to avoid (**Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018: 48-49**). As an informal project we did not have the capacity to resolve the essential issues of digital inequality, but we were able to avoid the creation of a hierarchy by giving each student a specific opportunity to speak, with more open discussion facilitated towards the end of the meeting. Students were invited to share their thoughts before the meeting via email if that was more suitable for them, whilst the Teams channel provided an ongoing discussion space in between the weekly meetings.

Nevertheless, there were limits to how far the in-person meetings could be reproduced. With audio and video conferencing technology, the physical cues people rely on in group in-person interactions are more difficult to read (**Naughton, 2020**). In Spring 2020, Teams was still an evolving software so only a small number of students were simultaneously visible on screen and cultures around the use of 'hands up' and 'chat' functions were still being created. Some students also chose to have their cameras switched off, either due to personal preference or because of their connection quality. Others were out-of-synch, had poorer quality audio and microphones that made them hard to hear, or dropped out of the call entirely. These issues limited the discussion's flow and caused hesitations and silences. This meant that as project leads, we had to take greater responsibility for managing the conversation. Overall, however, the Teams meetings were successful, especially in terms of allowing the project to continue despite COVID-19. On the project website, some student participants commented that remote working actually created 'so much more room' for working together. They noted that it made them realise that the online Teams space was far more than just an add-on to the in-person meetings. These findings suggest that despite some aspects of teaching being difficult to replicate online, there are a wide range benefits to online learning for students including, as Neary's research has suggested, increased scope for collaboration across multiple sites and the

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extension of research communities (**Neary et al., 2010**). These findings accord with other emerging research on the student learning experience during COVID-19 and their implications for future pedagogy (**Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020**).

Another potential moment for the project's co-creation principles to slip was towards the end of the project, nearing key deadlines. As we desired to ensure the creation of the online exhibition, it was increasingly tempting for us to take decision-making power away from the students by setting formal deadlines or work schedules, rather than helping them establish these amongst themselves. We had to avoid turning student-led co-creation into a staff-led project and imposing traditional vertical leadership over the shared model which had been established (**Angelo and McCarthy, 2020**). We had to be prepared to let the project's outputs to not materialise as hoped if the students were unable to complete all the work required due to time pressures of formal university commitments (exams and coursework deadlines) or the constrictions and stresses of COVID-19.

To get around this challenge, we actively encouraged student team members to step forward into roles to manage deadlines and scheduling, and assume greater responsibility for the project. A 2013 study on personality and ability's impact on teamwork and team performance amongst undergraduates examined traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. It showed that extravert, conscientious students were more inclined to take a leadership role, 'police' other participants by encouraging timely completion of work, and set an example by delivering their own work promptly. They are usually clear communicators and highly engaged and invested in the project (**Rhee et al., 2013**). With this in mind, we encouraged certain students with these personality traits to come forward to lead the dedicated Website Team. This team, with group agreement, acted as managers through this final stage of output delivery. This management arrangement avoided any disruption of the participants' sense of equality or shared leadership.

The Website Team delivered the website on time and the final output far exceeded expectations. On 12 June 2020, the online exhibition was launched through a Teams 'Live Event' curated by the student participants. It included presentations by Kathryn, Professor Penny Roberts (Chair of the Faculty of Arts), and the artist Matthew Raw (who is creating the ceramic artwork that will front the new Faculty of Arts building). The students offered a guided tour of the website, a Q&A session, and an interactive quiz. The event was supported by extensive advertising and promotion by the Digital Team through the project's social media and

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various university communication channels such as the Student Union and departmental mailing lists.

After the launch, we held several meetings with the student participants to summarise and reflect on experiences of the project, and came together with Gaz J Johnson, editor of *Exchanges*, to discuss the journal process (with publication of a journal special issue being another output the students on the project noted interest in exploring). We continued to act in mentoring roles for the students as they developed their research articles for this special issue. The Teams space was again used to facilitate this communication between participants and engagement remained high even through the summer vacation period.

Outputs and Evaluation

As a feature of the *Then & Now* online exhibition, the students involved in the project were asked to reflect on their experiences. These free-form reflections, provided in full on the project website, demonstrate the pedagogic success of the project, and how the students understood the benefits of being involved. Many of the students noted being attracted to the project because of the opportunity it provided to work in a different way with staff and students from across the Arts Faculty. One student wrote: 'I'm very excited to be part of this project, as it has enabled me to learn from staff members and other students, and to experience their amazing creativity, imagination and determination to keep this project alive!'. Other students commented: 'I've gotten involved with the interview team because I love getting to know people and I am really interested in finding out about student life before I went to uni', and 'It's been a very unique and rewarding experiment, and I say experiment because it is nothing like anything else I have tried at university. It's an amazing mix of new discoveries, archival research, learning and sharing what we have found with the larger public'. Among other things, students cited the opportunity to learn more about Warwick's history and engage in archival research, interviewing, and the curation of an exhibition, as key reasons why they got involved. One student wrote: 'I joined the project as an opportunity to gain experience in archival research and working within a multi-faceted project, that demands co-ordination and collaboration between team members'. Another student reflected that by participating in the project they were also helping build their employability: 'I want to do curation after university, and like to have the chance to do a project where we are basically creating from scratch an exhibition and doing the interviews and finding the archive material. I have not had any other experience like that at university'.

In their testimonies, several students reflected on what they had learned from their experiences on the project. Many noted the importance of working closely with team members: 'I definitely learned how important it is to keep your team members engaged and especially when we are working in an international and interdisciplinary team'. Learning digital skills and the opportunity to be creative in an online environment, especially in the context of COVID-19, was identified as of particular value by several students, with one writing that: 'The experience has been enlightening to see how much more we can do online, than I originally thought. In my head the online was just extra, whereas I feel now that we are properly utilising it. COVID has opened new doors'. Furthermore, some of the students reflected that engaging in the project during the COVID-19 crisis had helped them build resilience and think creatively. One student noted: 'I would lie saying that the current crisis of COVID-19 hasn't affected me. Of course it did, but moving from the physical to the digital space has not been such a big challenge for me at least workwise. It made us think more creatively and we managed to keep the project alive'. Another student reflected how the project had pushed them out of their comfort zone and, by doing so, had helped them build confidence, writing: 'I get very stressed when talking in front of a group or to people I've never met before. So, participating in meetings and speaking before everyone and conducting interviews has really pushed me out of my comfort zone which I really appreciate because I find it hard to do that'.

Altogether the students' testimonies demonstrate how much they enjoyed participating in the project due to its interdisciplinary and collaborative focus, co-creation, project and problem-based approach, and the opportunity it provided to apply their learning to 'real life' research, curation, and public engagement, and for their work to be 'seen' by the public. They show how the students who participated in the project understood it as bringing them tangible benefits in terms of feeling part of a learning community and making friends, learning new academic and employability skills (research, problem solving, digital literacy, critical thinking, communication, and problem solving), gaining employability experience, building confidence and resilience, and having the opportunity to be creative and give something back to the community. Their testimonies also reveal how far they understood the project's virtual learning environment and digital scholarship as key to its success, and how COVID-19 created the context for the collaborative learning and co-creation opportunities that virtual learning environments create to explored to the fullest.

Then & Now has generated several highly successful outputs. Some of these were planned from the project's inception, while others evolved organically from ideas presented by the students. The main output was the online exhibition. The online exhibition website showcases the breadth and depth of the students' research. The website launch event was attended by 79 people and the recording has been viewed 89 times as of 1 February 2021. The number of page visits to the website since speaks volumes for the project's success as a public engagement initiative as detailed in Table 1.

	Total Hits (month)	Average hits (day)	Maximum hits (day)	Minimum hits (day)
June 2020	7231	241	594	40
July	4194	135	236	2
August	3894	126	180	109
September	3539	118	150	94
October	2909	94	165	68
November	2563	85	156	63
December	2201	71	109	55
January 2021	2217	72	99	51

Table 1: User numbers for the Then & Now: Arts at Warwick Website. June 2020-Janaury 2021.

Feedback received both during and after the project's virtual launch event provides a qualitative measure of the positive reaction to the project as a pedagogic intervention and research and public engagement activity, and how it successfully created a sense of learning community. During the launch, some viewers used the Live Event's 'Question and Answer' chat box to express their opinions on the exhibition. These comments included: 'Fantastic tour of the website, real showcase of your brilliant research'; 'There's a lot of work and research in this project! Really well done! Such an interesting project!'; 'The whole project is brilliant'. In addition, after the launch, members of the university's senior management got in touch via email to note: 'This was fascinating and really interesting to watch, particularly the presentation; hearing about the history, comments and visuals on the community and campus, both old and new, and lockdown experiences from staff and students' and 'This is really great. I especially liked the "on campus" film'.

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The other major output was the project's Instagram account. This launched on 30 March 2020, just over two months before the exhibition launch. Based on the Digital Team's previous experience and the average popularity of other university-related Instagram accounts, the target was to reach 300 followers. This target was reached in just a fortnight and the project counted 400 followers by early May, 450 by the exhibition launch, and 465 on 1 September 2020. The account's natural growth was due to word-of-mouth and a deliberate strategy of following the existing Warwick Instagram community, both official university accounts (university library, clubs, societies, etc.) and individual students. To ensure varied posts, themed content was uploaded on different days: Tuesday was 'In Depth' focus on aspects of research, Wednesday's 'Behind the Scenes' posts documented student participants at work, '#ThrowbackThursday' used documents from the archives and old photos of campus, and 'Interactive Friday' mixed quizzes, polls, and asking questions of followers to help shape the research. The project's social media presence far exceeded initial expectations.

Other outputs developed by the students included Malina Mihalache's article in *Art Space*, and Madeleine Snowdon's art piece in the Arts Faculty Digital Arts Lab Showcase. Following the exhibition launch, Pierre and Elena Ruityke were interviewed for the Warwick student newspaper, *The Boar*, whilst Eilidh McKell wrote a personal account of her experiences for the same publication (**Karageorgi, 2020; McKell, 2020**). Pierre produced a reflective blog post on the project for IATL (**Botcherby, 2020**), and was interviewed as part of *The Exchanges Discourse* podcast (**The Exchanges Discourse, 2020**). The wide range of planned and spontaneous outputs, as well as the special issue of *Exchanges* in which this article features, are the basis of the project's legacy. The level of positive engagement with the project is indicative of its success and its ability to create a sense of learning community amongst the project's student participants and staff and students from across the university. Moving forwards, it is envisaged that new iterations of *Then & Now* and other similar student-led research projects will feature as part of a student portfolio option available to second year Arts undergraduates at Warwick.

Critical Evaluation

Against the project's successes, it is useful to reflect on how it could have been improved. Firstly, there could have been greater cohort diversity. There was an interdisciplinary bias in the numbers of students recruited towards History of Art and Cultural and Media Policy Studies due to the project's framing. Several large departments – History (1), Modern Languages (1), English (0) – were under-represented. The subject bias translated into the project outputs, with the exhibition firmly taking centre

stage, and its focus on campus architecture and art collections. Recruiting more students from other disciplines might have resulted in more varied outputs. For instance, students from English or Theatre Studies might have directed the project towards more creative or performative responses.

The cohort was also gender biased, with 18 female students and 1 male student. In comparison, the Warwick undergraduate student population is almost 50:50 male-female (**Warwick University Equality Monitoring Annual Report, 2018/19**). For postgraduates (taught and research) the ratio is also roughly equal, though amongst postgraduate taught students nearly 54% are female, compared to 46% male (**Warwick University Equality Monitoring Annual Report, 2018/19: 63, 66**). Of the 6 postgraduate students, all were female. The 18:1 gender split on this project does not reflect the university's overall population. It is unclear why this project proved more appealing to female students rather than male.

The cohort was also skewed towards white European students. The small minority of Asian students involved dropped away before the project's completion and during the COVID disruption in March 2020. The university is predominantly white at undergraduate (59%) and post-graduate research (60%) level, although amongst taught post-graduates the largest ethnicity is Asian (50%) (**Warwick University Equality Monitoring Annual Report, 2018/19; 61, 66, 69-70**). This bias was reflected in the online exhibition where the experiences of international students and of ethnic minority students were largely missing. The project's voluntary status may have limited its inclusivity as evidence suggests that ethnic minority student groups are more likely than white students work alongside their study and/or have caring responsibilities (**Singh, 2011**). Future projects could frame their areas of focus differently - for instance, focus on the historical experience of ethnic minority students or international students - and look at how students are supported to take part to encourage higher engagement from these student groups.

Secondly, no formal attempt was made to track the students who were involved or students' experiences at different stages of the project. Nor was formal feedback was sought from the participants, beyond their informal 'Behind the Scenes' contributions. On reflection, collection of such feedback would have been useful for providing insights into how to develop and improve similar projects in the future and address some of the shortcomings outlined above. Gathering demographic and study data about the students involved in the project may have also enabled more critical examination of whether the intervention supported progression, attainment, and employability. How far this sort of information is gathered for research purposes does, however, need to be carefully balanced in co-

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creation projects such as this as it has the potential to disrupt the power balance between participants. In our case, we felt the student created reflections was the most appropriate feedback method as it enabled it to be student produced without direction by us.

Conclusion

Then & Now was an experimental and wide-ranging project that evolved amidst extremely challenging circumstances following the COVID-19 pandemic. So much activity took place on the project that encapsulating it in a single article is almost impossible – partly why the project has an entire special issue! With so much of the work taking place independently of us, it has also been difficult to fully comment on how students conducted their work and achieved their aims. In this article we have instead focused on our vision, practice, and experiences on the project, and what we have understood as its value and contributions to practice. The students speak more fully to this in their own testimonies on the *Then & Now* project website and in their contributions elsewhere in this special issue.

Then & Now involved as many learning curves for us as for the student participants. Pedagogic models of student co-creation, student-led-research and student as producer all provided useful approaches. Applied to research which focused on the history of student voice and engagement, this combination of approaches created a potent mix for enabling the student participants to assume leadership over the project as a whole. Working in such uncharted pedagogic territory, we had to develop innovative pedagogic approaches with the students to support them in feeling empowered and capable of taking responsibility over the project's management, and associated research and public engagement activities. Overall, we treated the students as partners, and collectively recognised and built upon the different skills and experiences we all brought to the project. The delivery of the project through the digital learning environment provided by Teams - both before and after we moved entirely online in the COVID-19 pandemic - was key for enabling collaboration between students both on and off campus, creating spaces for research exchange, inspiring student creativity, and developing thinking for how technology could be used to blur the boundaries between research, learning, and public engagement.

As teachers, relinquishing the power of the hierarchical teacher-student relationship was not always easy, especially towards the end of the project when the temptation to step-in to ensure outputs were achieved was strong. However, throughout the project we worked together to reflect on our concerns and find solutions that supported the students' independence. Our transparency with the students over our wishes to enable them to operate in this way seems to have been key to the

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delegation of power to the students. In being transparent with them and asking them how we could support them most effectively, we used teaching approaches that were tailored to students' needs. Giving up the power of being the expected authority in the room enabled us to enjoy the project and participate in ways not possible in traditional teaching and research activities. Upon reflection, although a clear challenge at the time, the move to emergency remote teaching was a significant enabler in allowing the students to assume greater autonomy over the project.

Our deliberate relinquishing the reigns over the project's management allowed the student participants to excel themselves and go beyond the project's original output aims. They came up with research topics and outputs more innovative and engaging than we could have developed alone or have predicted. It enabled the project to feel inclusive and community-led; although, as we have noted, the project regrettably seemed less appealing and inclusive to certain student groups. With similar projects in the future, ensuring greater gender, racial, and ethnic inclusivity would be a priority for us both. The project being largely student-led also seemed to promote wider engagement with its outputs from staff, students, and the broader Warwick community, than could have been achieved if it were just managed and directed by staff.

In enabling the student participants to make a 'real' impact on the future of Warwick's Arts Faculty and to participate in 'real' life research and public engagement initiatives, the project quickly assumed 'real' meaning for students. From the start, they were invested in its success, enabling them to take leadership over the project increased this commitment. The challenges of COVID-19 and the changing management furthered the students' resolve in making *Then & Now* a success, and encouraged them to think bigger and bolder about their activities and what they wanted to achieve. The project stands as a showcase to the enormous skills of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and their capacity for hard work, innovation, creativity, and collaboration. It shows how much students can achieve if given resources, support, opportunities, and encouragement to succeed.

The success of *Then & Now* suggests great potential for how teacher-student hierarchies and boundaries between different arenas of academic activity can be blurred in co-creation projects that take place, at least partially, in digital learning environments. Involvement in the project has been, for us both, one of the most enjoyable experiences of our careers. We know the students on this project better than any other students we have worked with and feel deeply connected to the project's learning community. It has been hard to leave this project behind, and it will leave a lasting impression on us both. We are so proud of all the students who

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have been involved at different stages of the project, and grateful to them for all their distinct contributions. We sign-off *Then & Now* with confidence of the lasting impact that it will have on shaping, for the better, the future experiences of Warwick students.

Acknowledgements

Kathryn Woods is Dean of Students at Goldsmiths, University of London. She was previously Director of Student Experience for the Faculty of Arts and Teaching Fellow in the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick. She was awarded a PhD in History by Edinburgh University in 2015. Her research interests include the eighteenth-century body, and higher education in Britain 1950-present. Kathryn recently co-edited a collection of essays entitled *Negotiating Exclusion in Early Modern England, 1550-1800* (Routledge, 2021). She has previously published articles in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Cultural and Social History*, and *Frontiers in Education*.
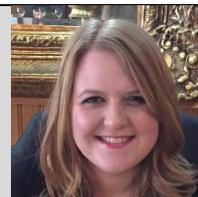
Pierre Botcherby is a PhD candidate in the University of Warwick's history department. His thesis studies the impact of de-industrialisation and (post-industrial) regeneration on community via a case study of St. Helens (Merseyside). He is also Administrative Assistant for the Warwick Oral History Network. 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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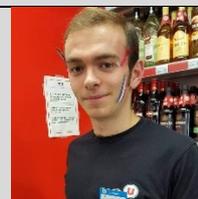
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