# Scaling Up: The pedagogical legacy of Then & Now

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#### **Abstract**

This reflective article explores the aftermath of the Then & Now project and demonstrates how the Faculty of Arts at the University of Warwick has sought to open up the opportunity to a greater number of students whilst simultaneously retaining the key learning elements of the programme. This piece demonstrates the compromises and challenges inherent in 'scaling up' a student intervention of this kind, alongside detailing the opportunities for improvement presented by repeating the engagement opportunity with a new group of students. The article also considers some of the difficulties presented by running the programme during the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic and reflects on learning opportunities and future plans.

**Keywords**: Student research; resilience; creativity; pedagogy; employability; engagement

## Introduction

As Then & Now: Arts at Warwick drew closer to its conclusion in the summer of 2020, it was clear that the students were engaged in a special endeavour. The level of engagement demonstrated was remarkable, and the students' excitement was infectious. Thoughts turned to how to capitalise on the possibilities created by this project; how to improve the programme and widen both its appeal and participation whilst remaining true to the elements that captured student interest. The interdisciplinarity of the project had ignited the students' imagination, and the level of creativity, digital skills, and teamwork demonstrated by the students directly addressed a number of priorities of the University of Warwick's Education Strategy (University of Warwick, 2018: 10-15). The challenge, then, was to effectively scale up and out from the initial scheme without undermining the elements that had made it a success.

The 'Student Research Portfolio' (SRP) was conceived as the successor to Then & Now. It was launched in February 2021 and currently supports four separate student groups engaged in concurrent projects. The structure of the new programme remains recognisable, with a few notable alterations. The focus of the research is no longer the Faculty of Arts itself. The SRP allows each student group to choose their own research focus, limited only by issues of scope and availability of materials. Thus, studying the history of the Faculty of Arts remains open as a research possibility but is no longer the only option. Each group in this year's cohort has chosen a topic with interdisciplinary focus, including early modern witchcraft, representations of suffrage, and historical ghost stories. Interestingly, one group also chose to research student life at Warwick, having been inspired by the work done on *Then & Now.* Participants have been encouraged to consider public engagement possibilities, relevant funding opportunities, and the lifecycle of their project beyond the boundaries of the SRP, further expanding the scope and impact of their chosen topics.

The programme retains its focus on creativity and interdisciplinarity and employs a number of similar strategies and methodologies that proved successful on *Then & Now*. The pedagogical methodology which underpins the programme, however, has shifted from co-creation to student-led research. Our aim this year was to test whether or not reducing the engagement with co-creation in favour of increased scaffolding and a greater focus on learning community would enable the SRP to successfully support an increased number of participants in future years, whilst still successfully meeting similar learning outcomes.

The scope of the programme has also been expanded to define new factors in its aims and outcomes. As it is free from the spectre of grading, this extra-curricular programme allows for a level of freedom of expression that would be challenging to offer on modular learning. Students cannot 'fail' the SRP, thus they are both supported in exploring their own capabilities and expected to take charge of their own project. Students on the SRP are encouraged to take risks and push the boundaries of their own experience without consequence. As such, both creativity and resilience have been embedded in the programme.

Table 1:SRP Learning aims and outcomes

Learning Aims and Outcomes	
Student-led archival research	Creativity
Interdisciplinarity	Reflective practice and lifelong learning
Learning community	Resilience

This article reflects on the process of transforming *Then & Now: Arts at Warwick* into a programme that may in future provide the capability to expand its reach, supporting both a larger proportion of the student body at the University of Warwick and a more diverse cohort. It offers insight into the opportunities presented by a second iteration of the programme – itself a pilot scheme – whilst also considering the alterations that were necessary in order to continue to champion authentic student-led arts and humanities research. Finally, this piece highlights the questions that remain unanswered one year on from *Then & Now* and the unexplored pathways that are open to the research programme in the future.

### Co-creation vs Student-led Research

Any second iteration to this student research programme had to have at its centre a commitment to broadening its reach; the capability to offer the opportunity to greater numbers of Arts students and of attracting participation from a broader pool of disciplines and backgrounds. As Healey and Jenkins stated in 2009, 'all undergraduate students in all higher education institutions should experience learning through, and about research and enquiry' (Healey & Jenkins, 2009: 3). Yet to do so while retaining the co-creative methodology championed by the initial project presented a hurdle: the level of academic involvement that Dr Kathryn Woods had undertaken in the early days of *Then & Now* was unsustainable in a larger programme. Kathryn's departure from *Then & Now* had demonstrated, however, that co-creation was not central to the success of the students' research endeavours. The students had been successful in moving on from the project's co-creation roots into a student-driven space (Woods & Botcherby, 2021). This was central to the programme's

redesign, showing that it was possible to create an equally immersive experience without this element of practice.

Thus, as Then & Now sought to embed co-creative methodologies in the Faculty of Arts, the second iteration focussed more keenly on student-led research, moving the focus of the project from level three on Walkington's 'Levels of Participation in Student Research' to level five: 'students initiate the research themselves, they frame their own enquiry and they carry out the research, but all of this is done in consultation with university staff at a level determined by the student' (Walkington, 2016: 10). Distinct from co-creation, student-led research empowers students to direct their own projects, thus reducing the dependency on academic staff. Furthermore, student-led research 'play[s] an important role in helping students to gain the skills of independent learning together with those of working with others' (Keenan, 2015: 30). This shift has moved the project from a research-tutored model to a research-based model, thus enabling project participants to focus as much on the skills developed through the act of managing one's own research as the content produced or knowledge acquired (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). Through this model, participants actively develop their leadership, project management, and teamworking skills.

The new structure effects the development of a key employability skill difficult to recreate on credit-bearing modules: resilience. As a student-led research project, participants must make their own decisions and correct (or embrace) their own mistakes. Through a practice of reflection, participants are invited to consider their progress and understand their 'mistakes as milestones rather than cliff-faces. In this way participants are invited to engage in an authentic experience that more closely mirrors an academic research experience, thus supporting the framework of 'students as participants' (**Ibid**).

The programme also offers a focus on creativity, innovation, and knowledge creation, thus aligning with modern approaches to student employability which seek to move away from outmoded 'tick-box' structures to a more authentic experiential pathway. As Bridgstock notes, current students are often 'underprepared to self-manage lifelong professional learning', whereas the greatest value is to be found in 'innovation and enterprise' (Bridgstock, 2017: 344). Allowing students to lead their own projects increases the opportunity for greater and better development of deeper skills learning that focuses not only on a series of attributes or competencies, but on networks of practice and increased capability to manage and reflect upon their own learning and progress.

Embracing a student-led research methodology has been successful so far on the programme. Each project benefits from the support and guidance of the programme co-ordinators in fortnightly hour-long meetings. This engagement does not require the time-commitment necessary from a co-ordinator in a co-creation project, thus one academic co-ordinator is able to supervise numerous concurrent research projects. Numbers were kept intentionally low this year to ensure that any cracks in the new structure were easily identifiable and could be addressed in a timely and effective manner. It is clear however that a greater number of projects and far more participants could have been successfully supported by the core project team as a result of the shift in approach. The simplicity of the new structure will enable *Then & Now*'s original project plan to be scaled up in future years without requiring greater resources or reducing the benefit of the programme to its participants.

# **Scaffolding and Learning Community**

The shift away from co-creation presented other complications, however. Whilst co-creation was not deemed necessary to the success of the programme, it certainly furthered the personal and professional development of those enrolled on the project. The co-creative methodology enabled the participants to benefit from a personalised level of support and attention, with queries answered quickly and problems solved directly. In order to ensure that participants on the SRP continued to meet these learning outcomes, it was vital that we addressed this skillsgap. The decision was taken to re-create this scaffolding through a series of interventions strategically timetabled throughout the duration of the programme. These sessions seek both to anticipate the needs of the student groups and broaden the range of their experiences on the programme.

Each session is delivered once to all participants via MS Teams, and is recorded to sustain maximum reach. Scaffolding events include workshops on public engagement, digital skills and academic writing, and sessions on project management and archival research. The majority have been delivered by relevant stakeholders from across the University; one session was run by former participants from *Then & Now* who offered a reflective seminar on their experience of leading a student research project. Others have included 'Design Thinking', 'Public Engagement' and 'Research Publications'. Participants on the SRP are encouraged to ask for further sessions if and when they feel it is necessary, and each session lead has demonstrated great commitment to working with the student groups beyond the bounds of the session.

This active demonstration of a learning community allowed the participants to better understand their own place at the centre of Warwick, further supporting them in meeting one of the original aims of Then & Now which had been retained by the SRP: to increase the sense of learning community across the Faculty of Arts. Smith and Bath's review of the literature in 2006 clearly demonstrates that 'skills tend to be best developed in contexts of high interaction, collaboration with peers and faculty, and engagement in a community of learning' (Smith & Bath, 2006: **266**). Environments in which students are empowered to situate themselves as part of a larger whole and are supported in engaging in cooperative learning activities with peers and staff allow for better development of interpersonal skills, communication skills, accountability, positive interdependence, and what Kreke and Towns referred to as a 'warmer learning climate' (Kreke & Towns, 1997: 6). This focus has also served to further break down barriers between staff and students, with an active focus being placed on encouraging students to independently contact those involved in the scaffolding activities if they wanted to discuss the content, or its relevance to their project. Central to this endeavour is the fact that many of these stakeholders are not departmental staff, but rather members of professional services or 'third space' academics. This broadens the students' understanding of learning communities at the University of Warwick and allows participants on the SRP to learn with members of this community with whom they would not normally engage in the course of their disciplinary learning.

A significant benefit of running multiple projects at once is that this allows the development of an interdisciplinary learning community within the programme itself. In the new structure, student groups are able to interact with each other, learn about the various projects, methodologies and outputs currently being undertaken by each group, and garner a sense of community from shared experiences beyond the confines of their own research teams. A mid-programme mini-conference has been embedded into the programme as a result of the new structure. This element further supports the development of the learning community whilst simultaneously giving participants the experience of presenting their research to external stakeholders.

Multiple concurrent projects allowed the SRP to address a concern born out of *Then & Now*: the likelihood that participants may feel marginalised, alienated, or lost on the project, a problem which stood in opposition to the co-creative methodology that underpinned the initial programme design. It was hypothesised that placing participants in smaller groups would allow for a greater likelihood of bonding between group members and increase the opportunity for each group member to have their voice heard. The new small-group structure also allows for breakdowns in group

dynamics to be more noticeable by the programme leads as it is easier to spot one marginalised member in a group of five students than two or three in a group of twenty.

Finally, the small-group structure enabled the SRP to further broaden the scope of the programme by empowering each group to choose their own topic. Each group was given the opportunity to define the focus and direction of their own project rather than joining an established undertaking. This departure from *Then & Now* was taken both to return power to the participants and to increase the draw of the opportunity to groups who perhaps were not engaged by the scope of the original programme. Participants were guided when making their choices; they were invited to attend an introduction to the resources and artefacts available to them in the Modern Records Centre (digital only in 2021), and were given support in understanding how to translate bodies of evidence into coherent research topics. Furthermore, students were introduced to academic members of staff working on interesting projects that they could work alongside, and were supported in understanding how to direct their findings outward and engage stakeholders in their work beyond the confines of the SRP. Where necessary, participants were also supported in understanding and navigating relevant processes such as ethical approval or funding applications.

# **Digital Spaces**

A further lesson learned from Then & Now concerns the usefulness of online spaces for running extra-curricular interdisciplinary programmes. When Then & Now moved online due to COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020, it was not clear how the project would function in a digital space. The learning that took place over the remainder of the project's lifecycle was central to the creation of a robust and resilient programme this year (Woods & Botcherby, 2021). At no point during the planning of the SRP was it clear whether face-to-face learning would be possible by project launch. As such, a flexible design was decided upon. Whilst it was hoped that it would be possible to run some in-person activities – the launch was delayed until February 2021 in the hope that students would be allowed by then to visit and engage with the Modern Records Centre archives in person – digital spaces featured heavily in the programme's organisation. Despite the delay, no face-to-face elements have been possible and the programme currently exists entirely in the digital space (Cabinet Office, **2021**). Unlike *Then & Now*, participants in this year's programme have never met each other or the project leads in person nor have they been able to engage with any un-digitised artefacts or resources.

What is particularly interesting, however, is that due in large part to the success of *Then & Now*'s engagement with and use of digital spaces, even the more favoured SRP model that included partial face-to-face engagement still utilised digital spaces more prominently than the physical, marking a sharp departure from the initial planning for *Then & Now.* The capabilities, flexibility, and connectivity offered by MS Teams enhanced project management and engagement, and enabled the programme to be offered in a more inclusive and flexible manner, as is discussed elsewhere in this issue. The absence of in-person workshops and commuting coupled with the ability to record meetings with ease has enabled the SRP to offer a more accessible experience that is in-line with current student opinions on remote learning (**Knight, 2021**).

MS Teams allows students to participate on their own terms, contribute without always being present, and catch-up easily at their leisure. Furthermore, the possibilities for open communication offered by the central message board allows participants greater freedom to discuss their work in spaces that are at once both public and private. Similarly to other digital spaces such as WhatsApp, MS Teams allows instantaneous communication, clear records of discussions and agreements, and lowstakes involvement. Unlike other technologies, however, it is visible to, and ultimately controlled by, the programme organiser and is a 'professional' digital chatroom. These digital tools have created not only the possibility for running such a project successfully in a remote environment, but of democratising such opportunities for effective teamworking and contribution frameworks to students in a range of different circumstances. Indeed, at the JISC conference 'How to shape digital culture in higher education' which took place in March 2021, participants most noted the word 'collaboration' when asked to highlight what digital culture in education meant to them (Dyer & Harris, 2021). It has never been easier to weave structures around such a broad scope of experiences and the opportunities this shift can offer are significant.

This is not to say that the digital space is free of drawbacks. Running a programme in this manner requires active awareness of technological inequality (JISC, 2021) and careful navigation of the problematic concept of the 'digital native', which has been widely criticised in the last decade (Bennett et al., 2008). This programme has sought to manage both of these issues. Firstly, we provided participants with a variety of methods through which to communicate, thus negating the need for expertise in one area. Participants have overwhelmingly chosen to use the flexibility offered by MS Teams, communicating through calls, chats, and channels. Furthermore, synchronous contact is maintained to support the establishment of the learning community, but an asynchronous framework is in place to enable participants to manage their own time,

personal circumstances (for example times when they are unable to access private spaces or quiet spaces), and connectivity issues. There is no requirement that participants' cameras are switched on. All scaffolding sessions are recorded and uploaded to the MS Teams space, as are group meetings and supervisor meetings. Therefore, participants are empowered to engage with the learning on their own terms. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, support for digital skills-learning was embedded into the foundation of the programme to scaffold the participants not only in navigating the digital spaces utilised by this programme, but also in expanding their own capabilities within the digital space. Due to the numerous benefits presented by MS Teams and the success of both *Then & Now* and the SRP as a digital programme, it is unlikely that this programme will ever be run as an entirely face-to-face programme again.

# Challenges

So far this year, the SRP has exceeded expectations. The student groups are engaged, work well together, and are creating exciting and relevant projects in the field of arts and humanities. There is plenty of scope for improvement, however, especially in the field of inclusion. It was noted during *Then & Now* that the project would benefit from greater diversity. Despite significant efforts in this vein this year, including broader advertising and reduced limitations on both engagement and topic, the SRP has not made clear enough headway in this arena. This year's cohort is 30% male and 70% female. This represents a significant increase in engagement from male students from *Then & Now*, but is still far from parity; male students currently represent 51.3% of Warwick's student body (University of Warwick, 2020: 58).

Equally, participants in this cohort are 70% white European. The remaining 30% of students are of Asian background. It is true that the largest minority ethnic community at the University of Warwick is Asian, representing 28% of the student body as a whole. As such it is unsurprising that there is a greater number of students from Asian backgrounds participating on the project than there are black students (**Ibid: 61**). That said, there are currently no black students enrolled on the SRP, despite black students representing 6% of the undergraduate student body at the University of Warwick (**Ibid: 61**). Thus, in part at least, the SRP has not been successful in addressing the diversity issues present on *Then & Now.* Further research and engagement work is required to ensure that the project becomes more inclusive and welcoming in future iterations.

The SRP has maintained the interdisciplinarity that was central to *Then &* Now, sustaining involvement from five different academic departments and matching the profile of *Then & Now*. This was a key aim of the programme, as interdisciplinarity is key to the learning outcomes of the SRP. As de Greef et al. have noted, 'to reach a more comprehensive explanation of complex, real-life problems, insights from several disciplines have to be reconciled and combined' (de Greef et al., 2017: 10). Moreover, in order for students to properly reflect upon and understand the relevance and situation of their disciplinary learning within a wider context, they must be supported in both looking beyond the boundaries of their own academic space, and also in grasping the necessity of their own discipline in a multidisciplinary approach (de Greef et al., 2017). Then & Now's strong engagement with students studying History of Art was replicated on the SRP (Woods & Botcherby, 2021). Furthermore, the SRP was successful in vastly improving engagement among students in the History department - a discipline that was under-represented on *Then &* Now. Whilst it is gratifying that the SRP maintained the interdisciplinary profile from its parent programme, however, it has not been successful in improving upon it. Several departments remain under-represented on both programmes, including large departments such as English and Comparative Literary Studies (ECLS) and the School of Cross Faculty Studies. It should also be noted that it was not possible for the SRP to maintain the strong connection seen on *Then & Now* with students from the Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies (CCMPS) as these students were studying at the postgraduate level, and the SRP was only open to undergraduate programmes. CCMPS did, however, launch an undergraduate degree in the 2020/21 academic year, so as this first cohort of students move into their second year of study next year, it will be interesting to see if they are as drawn to this programme as their postgraduate counterparts were to Then & Now.

## **Further Opportunities**

There are certainly more improvements to be made to the SRP in the coming years. In the first instance, we hope to see a vast increase in uptake across the student body. It is hoped that success stories from students engaged in this year's programme, coupled with a more targeted marketing campaign and fewer restrictions on teaching next year, will allow us to better engage the undergraduate population across the Faculty of Arts. The benefits and opportunities provided by this programme for skills learning, teambuilding, and employability are worthy of exploration and expansion.

Beyond this, we hope to strengthen our offer to participants in the field of public engagement. This year's project has connected participants with the Warwick Institute of Engagement and the support of the WIE Fellows has greatly improved the possibilities and plans for public engagement in each project on the SRP. It is clear, however, that the SRP would benefit from introducing these themes earlier in the schedule, and from providing the participants with more scaffolding in engagement work. This would benefit a number of learning outcomes embedded in the SRP. Firstly, participants would gain new opportunities to demonstrate and explore their own creativity, resilience, and teamworking skills, both as they improve their understanding of and capability in theoretical public engagement, and through the acquisition of learning in the relevant practical tools and technology utilised in this area. In addition, the learning community would be strengthened as this element would broaden the participants' understanding of their community, and of community boundaries. Furthermore, improving this aspect of the programme would reinforce both the interdisciplinary reach of the outputs and the participants' opportunities for lifelong learning.

Finally, we hope to broaden the possibilities for participants to take control of their project afterlives. Many of our students have begun to produce exciting and innovative outputs through the SRP this year; we intend to ensure that these projects are not forgotten after graduation. In the first instance it is our intention to ensure that a record of this year's outputs remains hosted on the University website to ensure that students can direct interested parties to a working example of their skills and talents. This will also serve, in future years, to broaden the learning community once again, allowing it to stretch across years as well as disciplines and professional boundaries (Wenger, 1998). Where participants are interested, we aim to connect them to a wealth of further opportunities such as student conferences, journal articles and other avenues for publication, alternative opportunities to engage in student-led research across the University (such as Warwick's summer Undergraduate Research Support Scheme (URSS)), and funding and enterprise schemes based at Warwick and beyond. Some of this year's participants have engaged with the URSS, written and published articles, and successfully secured further funding for their projects. Furthermore, it is hoped that participants will also, eventually, be given the opportunity as final year students to supervise their own SRP projects in our place, thus giving them a more advanced perspective on student-led research, project management, and learning community whilst also providing even more avenues for student research at the intermediate level.

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