

# Essex Student Journal Conference 2024: conference proceedings and reflective report

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## **Abstract**

The Essex Student Journal Conference was a student-led conference hosted at the University of Essex in 2024. The Essex Student Journal (ESJ) is a multidisciplinary, diamond open access student journal. The ESJ Conference provided an opportunity for authors of papers within the journal to present their research findings, as well as for previous and current editors to reflect on lessons learnt through engaging with the ESJ. The team behind the running of this conference reflect that the conference gave their student authors a voice beyond that of the papers themselves, providing a mechanism for student research to be celebrated, alongside opportunities for strengthening connections within and between departments both for students and staff.

**Keywords:** Essex Student Journal; student journal; student journal conference; conference; University of Essex

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## **Introduction**

The Essex Student Journal (ESJ) hosted its first ever conference in May 2024. This conference provided an opportunity for authors of papers within the ESJ to present their research to an audience of fellow students, members of academic and professional services staff, and guests to the University. In addition, current, and previous, editors for the journal discussed their experiences working with the journal and provided reflections on the importance of student journals and

diamond open access more widely. In the below reflective piece, members of the Essex Student Journal team discuss their experiences of the conference. First, we hear from Kimia Aghasoleimani, current Student Journal Editor, before hearing from Tom O'Toole-Mills, Research Services Coordinator, and finally Hannah Crago, Open Research Development Librarian. All presentations from the conference are available to download alongside this reflective piece.

### **Reflections from Kimia Aghasoleimani, Student Journal Editor**

As the current Student Journal Editor, I had the honour of opening and closing the Essex Student Journal Conference, as well as giving a talk on the Journal's growth and importance of student publishing and open research alongside the Journal's previous editors. I also touched on this year's special issue, which is centred on sustainability. The conference provided our authors with the opportunity to present the work that they have published in the Journal and highlight some of the opportunities to which publishing has led them. With the Journal being "run by students, for students", the conference allowed for this motto to be showcased through each of the talks from the editors and authors, demonstrating the community that the ESJ has brought together.

We had the privilege of hearing from five of our authors, four of whom discussed their research and one of whom spoke about the benefits and skills obtained from publishing in the Journal. Louis Mitchell highlighted the racial disparities in wealth and welfare in the United States; Mawadah Nofal explained the 'digital divide' and inequalities in individuals' access to the digital world; Akshana Ravikumar discussed the gender gaps in the labour market and their links to risk and competition; and Pablo Soriano Mena used a clever pizza analogy to exhibit the decreasing portion of GDP that is paid to labour workers as wages and benefits. Interestingly, although the articles associated with these projects were published before this year's sustainability issue was launched, they fit within the scope of the issue and highlighted the various aspects of sustainability as a practice. Our fifth author presentation was by Luke Wheeler, who spoke about his publications on Huntington's disease and the difficulties in curing cancer, as well as the writing/research skills he has obtained from publishing in the Journal.

On the topic of sustainable practices, particularly in terms of equality, diversity, and inclusivity, I feel that one of the most outstanding aspects of the conference was that it showcased the positive impact that open research can have, particularly on students' development. The ESJ is a diamond

open access journal, meaning authors do not have to pay to publish, and readers do not have to pay to access articles. This allows for greater outreach for authors of all backgrounds and disciplines and ensures the accessibility of articles to the wider community, all of which encourage sustainability through diversity and inclusivity. Given the wide international community at the University, I feel that the Journal and this conference provide students with the most valuable opportunity to establish themselves in research and academia, whilst increasing the diversity of the student community's research outputs.

All in all, the conference was a great experience, and it was incredible seeing the ESJ community come together. From the history of the Journal, given through each of the editors' talks, to the authors' presentations, it is clear to me that the ESJ is making a positive impact on open and sustainable research, while supporting the growth of the student community in their academic ventures. It is my hope that this conference will be the first of many and will pave the way for annual ESJ conferences.

### **Reflections from Tom O'Toole-Mills, Research Services Coordinator**

The first Essex Student Journal Conference was the culmination of months of effort from the Student Journal Team, our supporters, and our students. In my role as Research Services Coordinator, I manage our Student Journal Editor, and oversee the running of the Essex Student Journal. This year, this included organising the conference alongside Kimia.

We hoped to deliver many things with the conference: a celebration of the success and the hard work of our student authors, reviewers, and editors; a platform for our students to present their work and increase their visibility; and a way to raise the profile of the journal across and beyond the University.

In all these aims, I'm pleased to say it was successful. It was truly wonderful to receive positive feedback about the event in its first iteration, and to hear about our student authors and their work.

It was a pleasure to work with our authors and editors and see how they shared their expertise. It's impossible to choose a standout moment as everyone contributed excellently and in their own unique way. Instead, I'll comment on a part where my input is more visible. I found working with

Luke Wheeler at short notice to prepare a pre-recorded interview that became his presentation to be an interesting alternative format that helped to provide a personal insight into Luke's work and the impact of the journal. As someone who works behind the scenes to keep the systems and processes running, you don't always see the positive impact you're making on students, and so Luke's interview provided one such insight.

Thankfully, there were plenty more with the other presentations and conversations at the conference. Bringing our authors, editors, and a live audience together helped to create an environment for discussion that publishing a paper alone doesn't provide, and the presenters and their work were well-received across the board. I'm aware of at least one instance of a presenter being contacted to collaborate based on their presentation and work published with the journal; another example of the impact we rarely get to see.

One of the key things I took away from the event was how diverse and deep the knowledge is that our students have. Students, particularly undergraduates, rarely get the opportunity to share their work in a way that enables readership beyond their module leaders, but the presentations of our authors showed well-researched and thoughtful analyses on complex topics that are very much worthy of consideration in the conversations our society is having. I'm therefore pleased that the conference offered another opportunity for their voices to be heard.

Going forward with the journal, we'll continue to find new ways to give our students a platform to share their perspectives and gain vital experience in publishing and communicating. A special thanks to everyone who makes the journal possible, particularly the Student Journal Editor, the University of Essex Library and Cultural Services and Student Journal Team, and, of course, all the students who submit and review with the journal.

### **Reflections from Hannah Crago, Open Research Development Librarian**

Managing the team behind the Essex Student Journal is one of the most rewarding parts of my work, and being part of the Essex Student Journal Conference exemplified this.

From the very initial idea of hosting the Essex Student Journal Conference, we knew that the conference had to be like the journal itself: run by students, for students. It was in keeping this philosophy throughout the planning, organising, and hosting that I believe the conference had

such a strong impact. Our student authors, reviewers, and editors, past and present, are the driving force behind the Essex Student Journal, and it was fundamental that this came across through the conference.

Attending the conference myself, I felt a real sense of pride hearing the impact that the journal has had on those students who have engaged with it. One example of this was shown during Akshana Ravikumar's presentation, where it was explained that publishing with the ESJ had contributed toward winning the 'global undergraduate highly commended award for Economics', which had over two thousand entries. Alongside this, Akshana felt that her experience presenting her research at the conference had improved her public speaking and confidence, one of the key initial aims that we had.

The creativity our authors showed through the presentations themselves also resonated with me. Communicating your research to an audience outside of your field is an often-underrated skill, and something that takes practice and nuance. It is also not something students need to do regularly, as they are used to authoring papers for their module supervisors and others within their departments. It is therefore testament to our presenters that a room filled with students and staff from various departments could clearly engage with the topics being discussed and get a feel for the impact this research has on the individual author, and the world around them.

Alongside this, a personal highlight for me was bringing together our previous student journal editors. Having worked with the ESJ since its relaunch, I have worked closely with all our previous editors. While unfortunately Lina Abdelhafiz, our very first Student Journal Editor, was unable to join us, Sara Sheriff, Dafni Kalatzi Pantera, and Aisyah Shamshun were all there alongside Kimia Aghasoleimani. It was a pleasure to hear from these four fantastic advocates for the journal about what they are doing now and how their paths have been influenced by lessons learnt while working with the ESJ. Our editors also reflected on the impact they feel authoring papers for a diamond open access journal can have on students, something which was heartening to hear discussed. I feel confident in saying that our editors' input to the conference will have brought inspiration to students in the audience, as well as to our authors who were presenting.

Following the presentations at the conference, all attendees were invited to stay to network amongst themselves, and with the presenters and ESJ team. This allowed connections to grow, as

discussions started within the presentations were able to continue in a less formal way. Opportunities for students to discuss their work with those outside of their departments are not often too frequent, so being able to provide this space for interdisciplinary discussion allowed for the strengths of the multidisciplinary nature of the ESJ to be realised in a physical way.

Overall, I am extremely proud of Tom and Kimia for hosting such a rewarding and inspirational event that truly captured the unique student-led philosophy of the Essex Student Journal. I am already looking forward to seeing which of our current authors may be interested in presenting their research in the future, so have every intention of making the Essex Student Journal Conference an annual event.

### **Conclusion**

The ESJ team would like to extend their collective thanks to everyone who played a part in the success of the first Essex Student Journal Conference. From the presenters and audience members to those who helped promote the event and helped with logistics on the day, the event could not have gone ahead with such success without all these people. The Essex Student Journal Conference truly was an embodiment of the Essex Spirit, and we hope to continue with its success into the future.

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