I am delighted to welcome you to the first issue of Diffusion: the UCLan Journal of Undergraduate Research, an incentive of the University’s Centre for Research Informed Teaching, which is funded by a special grant from the HEFCE.

Undergraduate journals are already an established feature of many American universities, but they have only recently been introduced in the United Kingdom, most prominently in the sciences. The University of Chester began publishing their Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Biological Sciences: Origin, in 2001, and 2006 saw the launch of two online science journals: Leeds University’s Earth and Environment (which includes post-graduate as well as undergraduate research) and Nottingham’s BURN another journal for undergraduate research in the biosciences. The sciences are now further served by Plymouth’s Student Scientist, which appeared earlier this year and Bioscience Horizons, published by Oxford University Press and supplied by a consortium of U.K. universities. But it was only last year that the incentive was carried into the Humanities and Social Sciences by Reinvention, a multi-disciplinary journal published by the University of Warwick together with Oxford Brookes, and the University of Sheffield’s CILASS, a journal for undergraduate research in the Arts and Social Sciences. With the launch of Diffusion the University of Central Lancashire now joins the vanguard of this new movement, contributing to the quest for an increased awareness of, and greater participation in, active research at undergraduate level. But what precisely is meant by research at undergraduate level and what are the benefits of a student journal in this respect?

The word ‘research’ was first coined in the later sixteenth century, as a noun (1577) used to describe ‘a course of critical or scientific inquiry’ (OED 2) and subsequently as a verb (1593), meaning ‘to search into’ or ‘investigate’ (OED a). Thus, students who engage in research (now often referred to as ‘inquiry-based learning’) are not simply absorbing or regurgitating knowledge or ‘facts’, information which is set before them, they are engaged in a search for knowledge, an engagement which requires an active, rather than a passive, approach and where the action itself depends more on the student than the tutor / teacher.
The undergraduate journal plays a significant role in relation to this process of inquiry-based learning. In terms of the undergraduate experience, it not only alerts students to the importance of research by providing them with an outlet, an opportunity to publish their achievements, it also encourages them to develop and refine their research, to nurture critical and reflective skills and to articulate and effectively communicate their results. It also provides an opportunity to participate in the publishing process itself, a valuable stepping stone for students who intend to progress to post-graduate study, where the publication of research papers is increasingly expected if not yet mandatory. Additionally, of course, it serves as both a forum for sharing undergraduate research across the community, and as a showcase of outstanding work by undergraduates, material evidence of the level of research carried out by students at the university.

As evident from the contents of this first issue, Diffusion is a multi-disciplinary journal; it publishes undergraduate work, not simply from different disciplines within a broader faculty, but from the University of Central Lancashire as a whole, inviting participation from undergraduate students in all subject areas. Thus, volume1, issue 1 includes work from Forensic Science, Health, Environmental Studies and Literature, and we already have contributions from Law and Medicine, Business Studies and from History scheduled for the second issue of Volume 1 (December 2008).

The conditions and selection process governing this first issue were arrived at via consultation with staff and students: interested volunteers who made up a preliminary steering group and finally an Editorial Advisory Board and an Editorial Team. For the first volume, the decision was made to publish work selected on merit by members of the academic staff, work which had already passed the University’s examination boards. This has resulted in an interesting cross-section of articles written in 2006 – 2008 by students in the second and third years of undergraduate study. The selected contributions vary in length and some, which were originally part of a final dissertation, had to be substantially reduced for publication, a valuable exercise in itself for the contributors who undertook this task. Whilst some of these contributions were awarded first class grades by the exam boards, others were not. So what were the merits that led to the recommendation and selection of these particular pieces?
Some readers were impressed by a clear understanding of existing research on the subject and an ability to link topical issues to current opinion and practice. Many used the words ‘interesting’ and ‘original’, identifying independent thought, and several pointed to the questions these articles raised as well as those they tried to address, a reminder that research is an ongoing process, an unlocking of doors, which invariably lead to other chambers of knowledge waiting to be discovered or simply reappraised. Diverse as these articles may be in subject matter, what the writers all share is an active engagement with the raw material of their research and an ability to think beyond pre-existing boundaries.

I should like to thank all the contributors to this issue, members of the Editorial Board and the Editorial Team (in particular the readers whose commitment and enthusiasm have been of paramount importance) and not least Stuart Hampton-Reeves (Director of CRiT) for his continued initiative, hard-work and direction in advancing the project to this stage. In time, as we expand our reader networks in the disparate fields, we hope to invite unsolicited submissions for consideration and to widen the scope from research articles and analyses of new data, to include inventions, creative works (visual, musical, literary), legal mooting, and reviews of undergraduate research methodologies, books and conferences. In this way we may encourage more students to participate in and benefit from the journal.

I hope you enjoy this, our first publication and that it will inspire all undergraduates who read it to build on their own ability to pursue independent research and to learn by inquiry.