
Editorial

Is There a Future for Xjenza?

This issue of Xjenza is a single issue for the year 2000. It is not for the lack of sponsorship or funds, or an over-worked editorial board. There simply were insufficient contributions to justify more than one issue. In the main, the papers featured in this issue were the only ones submitted to Xjenza during the year. One might well ask: "Has no more research of local interest been carried out or written up?" or on a more optimistic note: "Is all the research that is carried out being published in international journals?" If the answer to the latter question is yes, then there is no point in prolonging the soul-searching. If the answer is yes in either case, the conclusion must be that there obviously is not the market for Xjenza. In which case, do we call it a day, and fold?

Realistically speaking, though, do we honestly believe that this is the case? Considering the number of dissertations that are presented by students reading for a degree in the Sciences, at the end of each academic year, are we to believe that all this research receives international readership, or are the results left bound in a thesis somewhere in the supervisor's office or laboratory gathering dust? Are we giving our students the necessary training in scientific communication? The Biology Department hold an annual symposium on the current research effected in the area, and students do present their work and write abstracts and short papers that are collated in the form of conference proceedings. Xjenza publishes these abstracts in the December issue of that year. The Department of Pharmacy do likewise. However, these are exceptions to the rule.

It would be an excellent idea to have a formal course in science communication in every undergraduate science degree, where students are made to publish research results as part of their degree course work. In this way, scientists going into different walks of life would learn to communicate with colleagues and also with non-scientists, be the latter, the general public or the media. The ability to communicate one's ideas and thoughts effectively is becoming increasingly important as society and economics grow more entwined with science and technology.

Undergraduate dissertations are by no means the only potential source of worthy Xjenza papers. In fact we have only had a few articles based on students' undergraduate work in the nine issues of Xjenza over the past four years.

While acknowledging the contribution made by a number of colleagues, and mindful of the fact that the journal should not be a forum for these few, where are all

the other fully-fledged scientists? Where are the results of their research on crucial local issues - on atmospheric pollution, on marine pollution, on waste management? Why is it that we only read snippets about such local research in newspapers - headlines to cater for the politicians' whims be they of one colour or of another - it really does not matter. So where are all our local experts? Is it truly mainly the case that it is foreign experts who are engaged to give an assessment of a particular situation requiring scientific expertise at an exorbitant fee while the local experts are denied the opportunity to make their valid contribution in a matter clearly within their field of specialisation? Or is it possible that the results of much work is precluded from being published for reasons of 'political sensitivity'?

Or is all this perhaps indicative of a more serious underlying malaise that is spreading throughout the academic corridors of this country? Working conditions for academics are so poor that scientists perhaps are asking themselves the question "What am I doing this research for? There is no remuneration attached to it, so why should I waste my time when I could be doing lucrative work?" Is the same perhaps being asked when it comes to writing up a paper with a view to publishing in Xjenza?

We embarked on the project of this journal in 1996, and we did so, knowing the difficulties and frustrations, with energy and enthusiasm because we felt there was a need for such a journal - a journal to provide a local outlet for the work of scientists in Malta. One aim was to enhance undergraduate science literacy and communication skills. To date we have had only one undergraduate contribution. We urge many more students to come forward, and we ask lecturers to encourage students to do so.

This is a plea to all of you out there to keep Xjenza going in such ways for the good of all, otherwise we shall be facing extinction like so many journals have before us. Believe me, it is worth saving if only because the effort of re-starting is devoutly to be un-wished upon anyone. On a personal note, if you will permit it, here is also hoping that this plea to you as Editor will fall on fertile ground. I leave it with you readers to mull this over, consider how you may contribute through submission of papers or help others to contribute a paper to our Xjenza, and keep it (and me) going for the benefit of Maltese science.

Angela Xuereb
Editor.