

WikiNets: Organising and Sharing Your Research

Introduction

WikiNets is the brainchild of William Zeng, a DPhil student in the Quantum Group in the Department of Computer Science, and a team of other graduate students: Erfan Soliman, Miriam Backens, and Brendan Fong at Oxford, and Daphne Erzer at Cambridge. It was among 21 winning entries in the 'Summer of Student Innovation' competition organised in 2013 by Jisc and a number of other organisations.

Recognising the active role that students increasingly play in enhancing their learning experience, Jisc and its partners devised the competition as an experiment to find out whether students themselves can develop digital technologies to improve their studies and research. Entrants were required to produce a short video to promote their idea, and the videos were judged by a combination of peer voting (via the web and Twitter) and a panel of experts.

The Challenge

The concept underlying WikiNets is simple: a researcher has an idea which they want to relate to other ideas, often in different kinds of ways. Very soon that researcher has built up quite an extensive and complex network.

Similar networks develop in our dealings with the human world – whether with other researchers working in the same field, with contacts in business and industry, or with people in our personal and social life. The challenge lies in maintaining these ever expanding networks while at the same time being able to keep track of an individual idea and its relationships.

The Innovation

WikiNets is a collaborative, open source, network-building tool to organise and share one's notes and research: in essence, it's a combination of a wiki and a concept map. Its basic functionality includes the ability to attach information and references to each idea (node), and to search both for individual ideas and particular types of relationships. Although inspired by William's experiences as a researcher in Computer Science, WikiNets should also be suitable for disciplines ranging from the natural sciences to literature. Furthermore, not only can an individual researcher share his or her own ideas with others, research groups will also be able to collaborate through the tool and thereby build a collective network. Winning a £5,000 prize in the competition has given William and his colleagues the opportunity to develop WikiNets into a real technology solution. The tool will potentially be adopted not just within Oxford, but also by other universities, colleges and learning providers. Over the summer the team has been developing an alpha version of the open source app.

Because WikiNets will be an open source tool, it can be downloaded and used for free. Also, users with programming skills can customise it to suit their own needs. They can then share the modified code with other users, thereby helping to extend the tool's features and capabilities for the benefit of the wider research community.

Top Tips for Success

William has this advice for would-be student innovators:

Students shouldn't forget to look within their own university as well as outside it when looking to innovate. Our WikiNets team already does some academic work together and this made our new collaboration much smoother.

Further Information

Watch William's promotional [video](#) for WikiNets on YouTube and read the team's blog, [The WikiNets Project](#).

Information about the competition was taken from the Jisc News blog post ['Digital savvy students offered £5k grants'](#) (20/05/13), [CC BY-NC-ND](#).