

British Conference of Undergraduate Research Evolves

The British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) was founded in 2010 and held its first meeting at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, in spring 2011, followed by a second conference at the University of Warwick in 2012. The University of Plymouth will host the third BCUR, April 15-16, 2013.

BCUR's main aim is to give undergraduate students from across the country (and beyond) the opportunity to present their work at an academic conference. The coalition of universities that founded BCUR believes passionately that research is an essential part of the learning process in higher education. However, it has been the students, rather than the organizing universities, who have really created BCUR. They have brought an energy and dynamism to the conference that I have never seen before at an academic conference. They know that they are pioneers and that students for years to come will benefit from the way in which these first conferences have explored the parameters of what an undergraduate conference is, and can be, in the UK context.

BCUR was directly inspired by the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Missoula, Montana, in 2010. I and my colleague Mandy Dillon took a group of Central Lancashire students to NCUR, and we were impressed enough to plan a British version. We were delayed in Montana for two weeks when clouds of volcanic ash disrupted flights across Europe, and this gave us plenty of time to reflect on our experiences at NCUR and consider how a British conference could be established.

Our first conference surprised us. We gave very little notice and did virtually no advertising, so we expected only 50 students to apply—but over 200 did. Ultimately, 180 students from more than 40 universities arrived at the University of Central Lancashire to work together for two days. The range of topics was vast, but we did not have sufficient numbers to have discipline-themed oral presentations. Instead, we created interdisciplinary themes, carefully structuring each paper session so that papers from very different disciplines could be brought together. Warwick replicated this at our second conference in 2012, when student presenters numbered more than 200.

What began as a practical solution to a logistical problem has become a deeply embedded part of what BCUR is. It is not, and never will be, a series of disciplinary conferences held at the same time; it is a genuinely multi-disciplinary conference that encourages students to interact with and learn from their peers across the academy.

Besides creating academic opportunities, we wanted to include opportunities for a dynamic exchange of ideas to help create a sense of an undergraduate academic community. One of the highlights of the first conference was a debate held at the end of the conference. In Warwick this year, Professor Mike Neary (Lincoln) hosted a speed-networking event on the first day of the conference. When we started BCUR, we were concerned that students would not know what to do or how to behave at a conference. Most of us are inducted into established conferences and learn “conference etiquette” from experienced academics. Our fears were unfounded. In fact, students engaged with the conference sessions with more seriousness and passion than most academics at previous conferences I have attended.

At this year's conference in Warwick, all of the sessions were well-attended, with standing room only in some sessions. Students stayed for the entirety of the conference and asked smart, constructive questions. The poster exhibitions were lively, and all the social events had a genuine “buzz.” It helped that the quality of the undergraduate research was uniformly high. Some of the best papers were selected for publication in *Reinvention*, an undergraduate journal published by the University of Warwick, and a full archive of the second conference is available via links on our website, www.bcur.ircg.

Many academics attending the Warwick conference told me that BCUR felt “like a real conference.” That is because BCUR is a real conference.