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# The British Conference of Undergraduate Research

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# **The British Conference of Undergraduate Research**

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The 2013 British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR), which was hosted by Plymouth University, was a significant milestone in the development of undergraduate research in Britain. I introduced the first BCUR conference at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston two years earlier, and in my introduction I said that it was not the first conference that would establish BCUR as an institution. Nor would it be the second conference (which we held in Warwick the following year) – only when we got to the third conference could we say that BCUR had fulfilled its aim and its promise. One conference, no matter how successful, is just a conference. A second conference builds on the success of the first, but it is only with the third conference that it becomes an institution, a tradition, a regular and recognized part of the academic calendar.

So when students from across the country came together in April 2013 in Plymouth to showcase their research and discuss their findings, this was the moment that those of us who had been involved in BCUR from the start had been waiting for. At the time of writing, we are busy planning our fifth conference, which will be held in Winchester in 2015, and we are also in the process of considering applications from universities to host the sixth, seventh and even eighth BCUR conference, stretching ahead as far as 2018. By that point, many of the students who presented at the first BCUR in 2011 would have completed their PhDs and started their academic careers as lecturers. Hopefully some of them will bring their students.

My own experience of the Plymouth BCUR was clouded in severe jetlag. I had spent the previous week in Wisconsin at the US National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR). My plane touched down in Manchester on the morning of the conference and I got straight on a train, arriving in time for the conference dinner. NCUR is the longest running and largest undergraduate conference in the world. Established over 25 years ago, this annual conference now attracts 4,500 undergraduate students from across America, representing every discipline you can imagine, all presenting their research to their peers and their mentors. I'll write that again in case anyone thinks it was a typo: 4,500 students.

NCUR is the most intense and extraordinary academic experience I've ever had. I first went to NCUR in 2010 and I took with me a group of students from the University of Central Lancashire. I went because I felt that the time was right to bring undergraduate research in Britain into the open. Many universities across the UK have been pioneering undergraduate research programmes for some years now. I could point to the work of Mick Healey at the University of Gloucestershire, Mike Neary at the University of Lincoln, Alan

Jenkins at Oxford Brookes, Paul Taylor and Caroline Gibson at the University of Warwick, and Martin Luck at the University of Nottingham, and I would only be scratching the surface of more than a decade's worth of innovation and activity. All this was happening within universities – but real research needs to be shared with a wider academic community. It was time to take undergraduate researchers out of their institutions and put them onto a national stage.

I found NCUR via the now traditional way in which most research projects begin: I typed 'undergraduate research conference' into Google, and NCUR's website ([ncur.org](http://ncur.org)) was at the top of the list. By chance, my university was sponsoring students to have international experiences so I used that fund to take 10 students with me. Before I went, I was at a conference hosted by my friend Simon Haslett at the University of Wales, and at breakfast I told him about NCUR. We agreed then that we would try and set up something similar when I got back – so BCUR was born, via Google, over breakfast and a handshake.

What NCUR and BCUR have both demonstrated is that undergraduate research is not simply about giving undergraduate students the opportunity to experience what it is like to discover something new. These events, like this journal, acknowledge that there is a lot of work of genuine value being done at undergraduate level. To give an example from my own students – recently, one of our Chemistry students has been awarded a patent for a process that significantly reduces the time it takes to purify water. She is clearly going to have a very successful academic career, but her work will save countless lives in the developing world. And she does not even graduate for another year.

The other important lesson from these conferences is that the next frontier for undergraduate research is an international one. The research community is global and there is no reason why undergraduate research cannot also be a global conversation playing its part in meeting some of the great challenges that face all humanity. This is the promise that research makes to the world and why governments continue (sometimes reluctantly) to invest in institutions designed to harness and stimulate the curiosity of brilliant minds. The foundation for an international network already exists. Both NCUR and BCUR are already international conferences – nearly 20 nations were represented at the last BCUR. Last year, I gave a keynote address to the second Australasian Conference of Undergraduate Research in Sydney. In April 2014, after attending another successful BCUR at the University of Nottingham, I went to Washington D.C. as a special guest of the Council on Undergraduate Research ([cur.org](http://cur.org)) to attend Posters on the Hill, a one-day event which brings together US undergraduates to present their work on Capitol Hill to Senators and representatives from Congress. We hold a similar event in Parliament every year – Posters in Parliament (which Plymouth won in 2013 by the way). I attended events in the White House and in the Capitol building, but the real achievement of the visit was an agreement to set up an international research exchange scheme that will give undergraduate students the opportunity to spend 6 weeks in another country on a research project. We have already run several successful pilots and I hope that soon this is an opportunity that many undergraduates in the UK will be able to enjoy.

When one is engaged in a research project, it can be hard to see how this laborious and sometimes lonely activity can have any meaning beyond the study or laboratory. But small stones can create ripples that turn into tides on far away shores. This is an exciting time to be an undergraduate researcher. The work in this volume is part of a broader movement, international in scope, global in impact.