

Celebrating the Student, Acknowledging the Researcher

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In a promotional video for the International Conference of Undergraduate Research (ICUR), previous *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Assistant Editor Molly Gardiner describes one's undergraduate years as a time at which 'you're at your most creative and your most unlimited'. When conducting research as an undergraduate, Gardiner suggests, 'you're able to explore areas and topics that you might not be able to later on in an academic career': as a result, undergraduates are often working with 'new, fresh, untamed ideas of what research can look like' which can – and should – inform knowledge production and practices in academic communities at large.

While undergraduates might be less constrained than career academics by specific research pressures – internal strategic priorities, external funding criteria and impact assessments, precarious job markets – their paths through research are obstructed in other, sometimes more insidious, ways. There are, for example, a great number of undergraduate curricula which don't require any research component (or at least none which is formally identified as such), meaning that students must seek extracurricular research opportunities instead. Access to these is often limited, however: by discipline or area of interest, financial capacity to undertake the work (instead of a part-time job, say), or even the base level of self-belief required to apply. And this last factor is amplified by what amounts to the ongoing systemic oversight or non-recognition of undergraduates as researchers at all.

Much of the existing literature surrounding the praxis of undergraduate research focuses on longitudinal impacts for individuals, typically in terms of professionalisation and skills

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development. These are important factors. We cannot deny, either, that where benefits are quantifiable, they are fund-able: by demonstrating the tangible impact of an undergraduate research programme on (for example) the career prospects of its participants, we are often able to secure its financial support and therefore its longevity.

Even so, the danger of focusing on undergraduate research and related dissemination activities solely as training grounds is that we (and our students, research-active or otherwise) begin to think of them as the preparation for “real” research. Never mind that many doctoral programmes take place in CDTs (centres for doctoral *training*); never mind that research is a reflexive practice at any stage in one’s career. In this model, something happens upon the conferral of a first or even second degree that somehow legitimises the identity of the student as “researcher” and inducts them into the research community proper. In spaces like the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR), as the abstracts in this special issue evidence, this is patently not the case. Undergraduate research may be a pedagogical practice, but it is also – by its very definition as research – subject to the same requirements of “new” and “original” as work at any other career stage.

Where dissemination activities like BCUR (and its international equivalents, like National Conference of Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in the USA and Australasian Council for Undergraduate Research (ACUR) Conference in Australia), ICUR, and *Reinvention* differ, then, is in their emphasis upon providing a platform to *recognise* and to *celebrate* undergraduate research, and a specifically undergraduate forum in which to meet and engage with other researchers. In feedback for ICUR, it’s often the conference opportunity itself that students cite as the “best part” of the experience: the chance to have people listen to and engage with and ask questions of their work, the feeling that their findings matter in a broader context, the recognition that student research can be just as rigorous and generative as research conducted at doctoral level and beyond.

At this year’s BCUR, I attended multidisciplinary panels in which I learned about topics ranging from the impact of open windows on the relationship between ‘forensically important insects’ and cadaver colonisation to the conceptualisation of masculinity in South African customary law, and I tried out a computer simulation of the place-based challenges experienced by autistic students moving around a particular institutional

space. In the poster gallery, I spoke to a presenter about formal and informal menopausal support in the North West of England, and I read about a study into ADHD and memory. In each of these presentations, and in each of the many others displayed at BCUR 2025, I learned something new from a researcher who had undertaken an original project with self-evident care, rigour, and imagination.

When we talk about undergraduate research, then, we're talking about development (academic and professional), training, and guidance; but we're also talking about reckoning with some of the most entrenched assumptions about the structures of academic institutions, at least in the UK. Practitioners have been working on and through these questions for years: for example, the concept of 'student as producer' promoted by the late Mike Neary pushed for reorganisation of the higher education institution around collaboration between undergraduates and academics 'to create work of social importance that is full of academic content and value' (Neary and Winn, 2009), amongst other imperatives. Ongoing engagement with these questions is vital. Within the spaces and limits we have, though, perhaps it's just useful for us (staff and students) to take as our guiding principles these very base assumptions: that undergraduate research can be and, indeed, often is 'full of academic content and value'; and that we (again, staff and students) have invaluable opportunities for learning at the spaces in which it's disseminated. Undergraduates are not *only* the researchers of tomorrow, after all. As BCUR 2025 shows so clearly, they're the researchers of today.

References

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