

Conference Report
British Conference of Undergraduate Research
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Kim Stevenson: Profiling the *Plymouth Law and Criminal Justice Review*

Plymouth University hosted the Third British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) in April this year with 86 student papers and over 70 poster presentations from a range of UK institutions and abroad including Norway, Poland, Moscow and Sydney. In April 2011 Stuart Hampton-Reeves at the University of Central Lancashire founded the first BCUR having been inspired by its American equivalent which has been running for over 25 years. The overriding aim of these conferences is to give home and international undergraduate students the opportunity to present their work and share their research at an academic conference making an 'important step forwards in the scope and ambition of British undergraduate research initiatives.'² The second conference, held at Warwick, was double the size of the first, Plymouth was even bigger and the Conference moves to Nottingham in 2014 and Winchester 2015. Unlike most other discipline based conferences it draws from the whole spectrum of undergraduate subjects with humanities meeting science, engineering and medicine. Students are encouraged to consider a diverse range of presentation styles including posters, spoken papers and creative outputs such as exhibitions, performances and film. The conference provides a unique opportunity to present dissertations, intern projects and any other original research developed by students through their undergraduate studies. The Law School was keen to support such an initiative especially with it being held on our home turf.

Readers of the [Plymouth Law and Criminal Justice Review](#) will know that it was originally created to showcase some of the amazing research that our students produce, strongly supporting Plymouth University's mission statement of facilitating Staff-Student Partnerships underpinned by the principle of 'shared responsibility and co-operative or collaborative

¹ Kim Stevenson is Professor of Socio-Legal History and Lisa Deblasio is now undertaking an MPhil on the subject of public child law and the Human Rights Act with specific reference to disability discrimination.

² See Freer, A. and S. Hampton-Reeves (2011), 'Editorial: A step forwards in British undergraduate research', *Reinvention: a Journal of Undergraduate Research*, British Conference of Undergraduate Research 2011 Special Issue
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/reinvention/issues/bcur2011specialissue/editorial/

action'.³ The conference therefore provided an ideal opportunity for the Law School to underline this. Final year law student, Lisa Deblasio, whose dissertation is published in this issue, volunteered to submit a paper on her research 'Hiding Behind the Law? A Critique of the Law and Practice under the Adoption and Children Act 2002' which was accepted; no mean feat when she wanted to get on with her final year exam revision. Lisa writes about her experience below.

In addition to student authored papers the BURC also offers the opportunity in parallel sessions for staff to contribute and talk about their research and projects in relation to advancing the profile of undergraduate work. I therefore offered a paper on my experience of creating and editing the *Law Review* as a vehicle for publishing undergraduate research, student news and reports which I hoped would be of interest, especially to colleagues who might be thinking of setting up something similar. My suggestion prompted a contact with one of the founder members of the BCUR, and Plymouth University's representative on the Steering Group, Andrew Edwards-Jones. Unbeknown to each other we discovered that five years ago we had both been simultaneously instrumental in independently creating respective online journals to support our students' work and enhance research-informed teaching, myself with the *Plymouth Law and Criminal Justice Review* and Andrew, with the [*Plymouth Student Scientist*](#), [*Plymouth Student Educator*](#) and [*Plymouth Student Journal of Health and Social Work*](#). We decided to co-present a paper, 'Plymouth Initiatives: Different approaches to publishing undergraduate research and scholarly work' to showcase, compare and contrast our experiences and lessons learned in facilitating and developing the publication of undergraduate research and student activities. We had both created a similar flexible, open access, on-line e-journal format.

Our paper compared the production and management of these journals highlighting common synergies in terms of some of the aims and approaches adopted, but also apparent distinguishing features and practices. For example, one major difference was that the Student Journals reproduce all the dissertations of every student who was awarded a first class mark, whereas the *Law Review* deliberately invoked a 'best of the best' criterion utilizing the role of the external examiners as a quality check analogous to a peer-review mechanism to identify those worthy of publication. The *Law Review* also requires students to work with their supervisors to edit the dissertation to something more typically recognizable

³ Levy P, Little S and Whelan, N., 'Perspectives on Staff-Student Partnership in Learning, Research and Educational Enhancement' in Little, S., (ed.) *Staff-Student Partnerships in Higher Education* (Continuum, 2012) p.1.

as a standard academic article differentiating the *Review* from the more repository style Student Journals. The audience was comprised of a mix of students and academic staff and this generated plenty of discussion about the role and format of existing and potential student journals.

As editors we shared our experience of setting up, producing and managing a student focussed publication, and developed discussion on the various and necessary levels of staff engagement to ensure a viable publication. We both stressed that it was crucial that colleagues were willing to assist in this as it is too much work for one person and here I acknowledged my personal thanks to all those – and I'm delighted to say that it is all - in law and criminal justice studies who I have called upon to engage in this. We also debated the relative success that these initiatives generated, how that could be measured and evidenced, and how journal success can be maintained. In support I sought comments from students whose work had previously featured in the journal asking them whether it had made any impact in terms of their CVs and job applications, pleasingly it appears it has:

“I was very pleased to have my dissertation published in the Law Review, it is certainly something I was very proud to put on my CV and to tell the firm I have my training contract with, who were in turn also very impressed.” (law student author vol.5)

“I remember feeling extremely honoured that my dissertation was being published - it is a great addition to my CV and was very surreal to be able to search for it on Google.” (law student author vol.4)

“I personally found it a really useful process not only in terms of CV building but also in relation to gaining experience of editing an article for the purpose of publication. Also I think that the fact that the content of this journal is comprised of both staff and student articles makes it more reputable.” (criminal justice student author vol.5)

I also highlighted the fact that the *Review* had received unsolicited approaches from two major US publishers GaleCengage and EBESCO, the former as part of their objective to host the ‘top 1,500 law journals in the world’. The audience were particularly impressed by this suggesting that it could be a determining factor in deciding whether to produce a more journal style publication which is more demanding and staff intensive or a repository which can more immediately and easily host students’ work. Overall, the idea of a conference to celebrate and publicize undergraduate achievement and the importance of staff student research is one that everyone should embrace and staff should be enabled to ensure that our students can, and are positively encouraged to, participate in.

Lisamarie Deblasio: Taking up the Challenge of Presenting at the BURC

I graduated in the summer of 2013 with a degree in law and in April I presented my legal research and law dissertation at the Conference. I was in the process of completing the writing up when I submitted an abstract of my paper to the conference organisers. Once my

work was approved as a presentation, I was then faced with the task of condensing the 15,000 word thesis into a ten minute talk, with a PowerPoint presentation as a visual aide. Preparing a talk on a legal research paper to an audience of mixed branches of learning was challenging. If I were talking to people who were not law students or law academics then I needed to ensure that I was using terminology they would understand and appreciate. Fortunately my research subject, adoption law, was an issue that could be assimilated in a way that did not require too much emphasis on the complexities of the law. Explaining to the audience that the work was based on the law that governed adoption, then going on to discuss my findings would, I thought, be sufficient to get the point across.

The conference provided an opportunity for me to present my research, but with only ten minutes to do this, my objective was to create an engaging and interesting talk that would do my work justice and hold the audience's attention. When I was preparing the synopsis of my talk I wanted to ensure that I included the most important factors in the presentation. I focused on each of the six chapters and the significant findings that I had made, concluding with a short summary designed to make an impact on just how problematic the law in this area is.

On the day of the presentation I was sharing a one hour time slot with two other students who spoke before me, both who made very high quality and interesting contributions to the conference. Nervousness can play a large part in public speaking and I found that nerves threatened to sabotage my talk, primarily because I am not experienced with speaking to a large audience. In situations such as this I found it was useful to arrive early and run through the presentation with a peer who can offer constructive criticism. I found this to be very helpful in remembering eye contact and to ensure my words were slower than conversational pace. Apart from a nervous slip with the PowerPoint my talk went very smoothly and I regained my confidence halfway through. I appreciated that talking to the audience rather than reading from my notes was far more effective. Following my talk there was time set aside for questions and I found I could answer them candidly and knowledgeably solely because of the depth of research I had carried out.

My talk was well received by the audience and this made the experience very worthwhile and positive. It is of course a considerable academic achievement to carry out research and write a successful dissertation, but being given the chance to present that written composition physically at undergraduate stage can take the work to a new level. Opportunities such as this allow the undergraduate to be *recognised* for their research and

commitment to study, and clearly reveal some very promising researchers and talented students.

Presenting my work at the conference showed me how good quality and meaningful research can be a powerful tool in imparting knowledge to oneself and to others, not just with the written word, but through verbal communication and technology. If a student is fascinated by a subject then the research and subsequent articulating of that work will shine and people will be interested in what they are saying.

I recommend participating in conferences at undergraduate level for any student who is passionate about their research and wishes to present their findings beyond the submission of a dissertation. This experience firmly convinced me that I would like to become a researcher and a teacher of law, something I had only considered prior to this. I was inspired to want to share my knowledge with others. If public speaking is anxiety provoking, as it is for me, then this is an excellent forum for personal development. A word of advice would be to ensure you keep the presentation straightforward and achievable in ten minutes. If using a PowerPoint, keep the number of slides to a minimum and make them visually strong with minimal text as the audience will read them rather than listen to you.