

# The Launch of an Undergraduate Research Journal

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*Reinvention: a Journal of Undergraduate Research* is supported by the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, a collaborative Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning based at the University of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University. The Reinvention Centre works to promote research activity in the undergraduate curriculum, not only in the final year of study, but as an integral part of all students' university experience. Being research active helps undergraduates to become embedded in the research cultures of their disciplines, departments and universities, with the potential to benefit both students and the wider academic community. It is important that this enhanced research activity has an appropriate forum for output, and this journal has been established in order to enable a wide audience to access some of the most important and exciting research carried out by students.

The journal itself represents an addition to a growing number of undergraduate research publications which have arisen around the world. Of these, a number of publications stand out as successes. In just one of its nine years, the *Journal of Young Investigators*, for example, published sixteen peer-reviewed research papers, thirteen feature articles and almost three hundred news reports. Another such publication, the *McGill Journal of Medicine*, has been described by one authority as 'a thoroughly professional entry into the world of medical publishing' (Schwartz, 1997). Despite these apparent successes, undergraduate research journals have a long way to go to achieve the level of credibility required to make an impact on academia. To date, the *McGill Journal of Medicine* is the only undergraduate journal to have been indexed in any of the major research databases. As one author has commented on the status of undergraduate publishing, 'it would be interesting to know if any article in these journals has been cited by anyone outside its home institution ... the journals risk being little more than "vanity journals"' (Gilbert, 2004). In addition to having little academic impact, many undergraduate research journals fall by the wayside due to a lack of submissions, or support from faculty members. Indeed, of twenty-four undergraduate philosophy journals listed in one online catalogue from 1998, only three continue to accept contributions in 2007. There remains no convincing explanation, however, as to why an undergraduate research journal should be doomed to failure or obscurity. It is certainly not impossible for a student venture to succeed in the world of academic publishing. For example, Riaz Agha founded the *International Journal of Surgery* while still an undergraduate at the University of London (King, 2006). His journal now attracts original research from academics all over the world and its editorial committee includes some of the most eminent names in general surgery (Agha and Cooper, 2006). One important distinction is that Agha's journal was never intended to showcase undergraduate research. We do, however, know that undergraduates are capable of contributing original research as such papers occasionally find their way into traditional journals (Metcalfe, 2007; Agha *et al.*, 2004), sometimes published in collaboration with academic staff (Short *et al.*, 2005).

*Reinvention's* editorial team, then, have an interesting and challenging time ahead. The team itself is unique in that it reflects true collaboration between students, academics, and administrative and technical staff. Students and academics will, for example, work together as Subject Editors to elicit submissions and coordinate peer review within each individual Faculty and School. Indeed, the collaboration theme of *Reinvention* is reiterated throughout its multi-disciplinary content and in the fact that its governance is

spread across Oxford Brookes University and the University of Warwick.

The first challenge faced by the editorial team is achieving the status required to make a discernable impact on academia. As one critic of such journals has claimed, there remains 'a question of quality control that might worry others about citing the article or using the data in their own research' (Gilbert, 2004). Every suitable manuscript submitted to *Reinvention*, however, will undergo a strict process of double-blind peer review. The peer reviewers may include undergraduate and postgraduate students but at least one review of each paper will be completed by a faculty member and recognised authority in the field of interest. As well as teaching students how to appraise research critically, this protocol will ensure that papers included in *Reinvention* are of a comparable standard to those published in traditional journals. The peer-review process utilised by *Reinvention* will both ensure academic rigour and maintain confidence in the journal itself.

One question, however, remains. If the procedure for publishing a paper in *Reinvention* is as rigorous as for traditional publications, what do students gain from submitting their work to an undergraduate research journal? The answer is simply that students stand to gain from increased support by submitting their manuscripts to *Reinvention*. We do not anticipate that all of the manuscripts submitted to *Reinvention* will be of a publishable standard from the outset. Instead, *Reinvention* will ask of its peer reviewers that they provide more comprehensive and constructive feedback than they do when reviewing for traditional academic journals. This attention to detail may encourage enthusiastic students whose manuscripts are turned away to re-write their papers in line with reviewers' comments before submitting their work a second time. It is hoped that, in this way, *Reinvention* may also help to promote undergraduate research and that the experience gained by authors will encourage them to produce papers for high-impact journals within their own areas of interest. Should this journal succeed in reinventing the passive student as an active researcher, it may claim some credit for changing the undergraduate experience and, perhaps, for a number of academic careers forged as a consequence. In this way, *Reinvention* may yet have a greater impact on academia than any of its proponents might now hope or imagine.

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