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Research
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ACADEMIC
CONFERENCE

The Newsletter for
Doctoral Researchers

Editorial team

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**A big THANK YOU to everyone who contributed
to this edition**

Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the Doctoral Times

This issue will discuss PGR conferences providing you with a range of top tips and advice from current students and academics, describing their own experiences and the benefits you can gain by attending conferences.

Conferences can be hugely valuable events with many potential benefits for students' research knowledge, activities and research networks. Knowing how to prepare and make the most out of the experience can make all the difference.

We would like to say a big thank you to all of our contributors for this edition, we have had a great response.

If you are interested in writing an article for the next edition of the Doctoral Times, then we would love to hear from you doctoraltimes@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Four Great Reasons to Attend Conferences

Attending conferences is an important part of any doctoral programme, but sometimes they can feel like an inconvenience and can mean breaking away from research and wasting precious time. But by taking the right approach to conferences, being prepared, and outlining your key goals, you can achieve a great deal and the benefits are endless.

Below we look at the key reasons why conferences are vital for your research and how taking the time out to attend can actually help to develop your research further.

Developing new ideas

1 Conferences provide you with a great opportunity to learn about the latest developments in your area. The benefits to attending in your first year is to help you gather information for your second, third, and fourth years when it's your chance to present papers. If you are studying a very specific area, tapping into current debates in your field can be very beneficial.

Conferences provide an opportunity to discuss ideas with other academics and therefore get exposed to different ideas and novel ways of thinking. In addition, conferences help us assess the significance and the value of our work in a constructive manner, where we pitch our ideas to others (who hopefully know more) and have the opportunity to further develop them. By attending conferences in your first year you have the opportunity to meet others in the field and hear what's going on. You'll also get to develop your own presentation skills by seeing others present - both in seeing what works well and what... doesn't.



2 Networking and making new contacts

One of the key benefits to attending conferences is the networking opportunities available and the potential to make valuable contacts in your field. Future collaborations and perhaps even job opportunities can be long-term benefits of conference attendance. Having a different audience for your work can bring new ideas and gives you the opportunity to discuss your results outside your local network, broaden your horizons, experience academic culture, and learn from experienced people.

Conferences are a great way of seeing what's going on in your field. People will often present some of their latest, unpublished work, and it can make a nice change to learn about things through watching a presentation rather than reading papers! It also gives you a chance to get to know (and be known) by other people in your area - some of those people might end up being future collaborators.

"I attended a very prestigious conference during my last year of my PhD studies where I presented a paper that sort of summarised my entire work. This proved to be a very good opportunity as I received valuable feedback which I integrated into my work for my viva. Also, as I was almost done with my PhD, attending this conference worked also as a job market, where I met academics from universities to which I was planning to apply for a job." *Efpraxia Zamani, Senior Lecturer in Information Systems at the University of Sheffield*

3 A fresh pair of eyes

Conferences are a great way of disseminating work to the wider community and getting expert feedback. Many researchers use them to test their ideas and put them out there for critical feedback. This gives you the opportunity to hear ground - breaking research, which you would otherwise not find in existing publications.

Giving a conference paper provides a different perspective on the research topic and a fresh pair of eyes for suggestions and ideas beyond the conversations of supervisory meetings. It is also a lovely way of meeting other PhD students, and creating a network, and for coming into contact with different ways of thinking (perhaps on the same topic). For the supervisor, it is good to see how the student deals with suggestions and questions, helping also to make them think through aspects of the research that they might not have considered in the supervisory meetings. The supervisor is also able to facilitate face-to-face introductions with other colleagues that might be useful to the student. It is about connections, but also about seeing other perspectives. Most conferences are friendly environments where people are genuinely interested in talking to you, and your research.

Extra perks.....

Conferences can also be used as an opportunity to travel/see new places and sometimes tag on a holiday too!

With a bit of planning a conference can turn into an eye opening experience, with the potential to enjoy a new culture and see some wonderful places.

4 Presenting experience

Attending conferences helps you to observe what makes a good or bad presentation, which will be of benefit when it comes to your time to present. Attending and presenting at a conference is very dependent on if and when the project has produced results. It is recommended to present as soon as you have something to say, getting advice from your supervisor on when would be a good time. Your first experience will always be scary, but it's good to get that first time out of the way as soon as you can! You can start to build your confidence and improve time after time.

Presenting a poster or talk at a conference gets your work out there and holds it up to scrutiny. This can help you gain feedback from experts and develop confidence in public speaking (linking to lecturing in the future).

“My first time presenting at a conference was early in my PhD, and I was presenting on my MSc work. It was the Solid Freeform Fabrication Symposium in Austin, Texas, and I was really nervous because there were so many leading experts in our area who'd be there. It turned out those leading experts were just super excited to see new people coming into the field, and were really friendly and supportive. It was a great lesson for me as I become more senior, in how much impact you can have by just giving people a bit of time and encouragement.” *Candice Majewski, Lecturer in the Department of Mechanical Engineering*

****Information for this article was provided by research supervisors at the University of Sheffield. We would like to say a big thank you for all their contributions****

The Conference Experience

Thomas Butler, PhD student in the Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, shares his experiences of attending Algal Biotech conferences

Throughout my PhD I have attended a range of conferences, mostly these were relating to algae biotechnology, but also Synthetic Biology in Singapore and an aquaculture conference in the Netherlands. Attending conferences and learning about other disciplines which are relevant can ensure you think about the bigger picture, enabling a broader overview of how your research can address societal needs and in my case it is essential that my research is commercially relevant.

To attend or not to attend

Some conferences only last a day and others can last a week. It is important to decide within your PhD budget which ones are essential to attend. Time in your PhD is precious and you have to decide if you can afford to take a week out to attend a conference as it might be a critical time when you need to do some sampling (working weekends is always a problem with biological organisms) or data analysis.

What to expect

Each conference will have a particular theme and will be broken into subsections. Often there are parallel sessions so you need to ensure you know which ones you want to attend as there might be several talks of interest at the same time. It is therefore important to know who is delivering the talks so you can exchange business cards. Regardless of which conference you attend, listening and understanding the talks is a sure way to gain knowledge and to hear different presentation styles. Another aspect which is potentially more important is the networking sessions at each coffee break, lunch, and the evening dinner if it is a multi-day conference. This is when you will meet people and can discuss potential collaborations, and help troubleshoot any issues you are having.

“Often when working as a PhD student you are working alone. Attending conferences can help you meet like-minded people who you can bounce off.”



The challenges

One challenge at conferences is finding a slot to meet the people you want to network with! It might be that you don't get time at the conference to talk with them but by obtaining their business card you can email them to follow up a query, but face-to-face contact is always better. Another challenge was initially dealing with nerves when presenting. When you have a large audience of talented researchers it is quite daunting but I feel we all have our own way of dealing with this. Mine is to imagine the audience as vegetables and that helps calm my nerves... it might not work for everyone but it does for me!

“I can't stress enough the benefit of attending conferences. It is great to put a face to a name and meet researchers you really admire.”





The benefits

Whilst attending conferences I have met several researchers whom I really admire for their quality publications. I have met a variety of people from different cultural backgrounds that have given me life experiences and changed my perspectives.

The biggest lesson I have learnt is to make sure your research is novel and rigorous, ensuring the hypothesis you are investigating is extensively tested. By attending conferences I have had the opportunity to present my research and to receive feedback on the good points. I have met several friends and colleagues who I will stay in touch with.

Whichever conference you attend in future, good luck, it's really worth the time out of your PhD!

Things to remember BEFORE attending a conference

- ◆ Contribute to the programme (if possible)
- ◆ Prepare and practise your talk
- ◆ Upload your slides to a repository and add a DOI to your presentation
- ◆ Schedule tweets with the link to your talk
- ◆ Arrange networking meetings
- ◆ Take your business cards with you
- ◆ Add information about your contribution to your out-of-office message

Setting Expectations



Kennedy John Ofor, fourth year PhD researcher in the Department of Automatic Control and Systems Engineering explains the importance of setting expectations.

As a PhD student, attending conferences is one of the ways of disseminating your research findings, networking with new people and learning about the state-of-the-art in your field. It is possible to get all three at most conferences, but you have to plan ahead how to achieve your goals before attending any conference. I have attended conferences in the past without well-defined goals. As a result, I hardly found such conferences useful simply because there were no expectations. Once I learnt the importance of defining expectations for attending any conference, I began finding every conference useful. I found this [15 minutes podcast](#) on how to make the best use of academic conferences useful.



BEFORE THE CONFERENCE

Define your expectations/goals

Before deciding on a particular conference to attend, it is important for me to set clear goals about expectations at a conference. This will enable me to choose the conferences that align with my expectations.

Decide which conference to attend

As a PhD student with limited funding, not all conferences are useful. So you have to choose the right conference that will maximize your expectations as set out above.

Preparing for presenting

If you will be presenting at the conference, it is pertinent that you prepare your slides and practise with your peers. The benefits of this are obvious as practise makes one more perfect. It is also advisable that you upload your slides to an online repository such as [Figshare](#), [Zenodo](#) or [Open Science Framework](#), and get a citeable Digital Object Identifier (DOI) for such slides. This will increase the discoverability of your research.

Plan your experience

Before you leave for the conference, go through the programme and select the sessions to attend. Research the authors of the papers that interest you for possible networking/collaboration. You could connect with them on social media and send them emails before the conference. If you are shy like me, this will make the networking meeting easier for you as you won't be speaking to a total stranger.

Search and connect with your peers before the conference and help one another during the conference. You could share accommodation and get some discounts.

Traveling to another country

Be aware that different countries use different power plugs and sockets. If you are traveling to a different country, find out the type of power plug being used in that country and buy an adaptor before traveling.



If it's to be, it's

Eunice Lawton, Researcher Development Manager, explains the best way to get prepared for a conference.

You need to put yourself in the driving seat!

It's no good turning up at a conference and expecting others to seek you out, ask about your research and tell you about possible future collaborations and career opportunities. Relying on chance is not a good way to run your life. You need to take responsibility for your career success by preparing to meet others and developing your networking skills to make the most of conferences.

So how can you do that?

Well beforehand you should start to think about the opportunities that may be available to you at the conference, such as:

- Finding out about the other research going on in your area
- Discussing with other researchers their current work and future direction
- Exploring future career opportunities
- Considering possible future collaborations
- Building a network for the future of useful contacts

Next you need to find out who will be there. Usually conference organisers will send a list of attendees before the event. Use this to prioritise the people you would like to meet and list them with reasons why. If you do not get a list then have a look at the list of speakers. If there is a twitter hashtag for the event then have a look through any conversations of who may be coming and decide if it would be worthwhile to meet them. To find out more about attendees, have a look on their organisations' webpages and their LinkedIn and other social media profiles.

Don't forget that others may be checking you on social media. Take the time to update your profile and make sure you include what areas of research/career you are interested in now and in the future. It's worth doing a google search on yourself just to check what others see and make sure your Facebook page is private if it's full of holiday photos etc.

Find out about latest Researcher Development news here:



's up to me



Presentations
and Abstracts



Depending on your confidence level you could then email people, that you are interested in, so that it will be easier to go up and talk to them on the day. You need to use your own style but something like this often works:

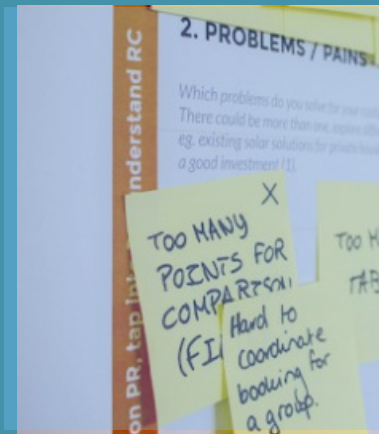
***Hello,
I see that you are going to the (conference name) and would like the opportunity to meet up with you for a brief talk while I am there. From your profile I can see that you are (include your common area of interest e.g. also researching Neurodegenerative disorders)***

It seems like it could be worth getting together for a few minutes while we are at the conference. I work at the University of Sheffield and am currently researching.....

Let me know if you are interested in meeting up, and we can arrange when to meet.

Don't expect to be able to set a definite time and place but you could offer to meet in the first coffee break or lunchtime and offer to exchange mobile numbers to get in touch when you are there. If they do not reply, do not assume they are not interested. People are often very busy so just go and introduce yourself at the conference anyway.

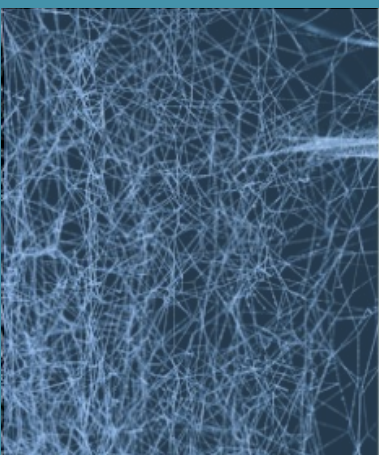
Finally make sure you have your 'elevator pitch' ready for when you go and a supply of business cards or similar to give out when you meet up. Good luck!



Organising and
Leading
Conferences



Poster
presentations



Making the most
of networking



Organising Oneself for Academic Conferences

'Away from the PhD desk is a world of many 'ears' awaiting to hear you communicate the abridged version of your research, and many 'eyes' awaiting to see the confident personality behind the advanced knowledge'



*Divine Mawuli Asafo, PhD student,
Department of Urban Studies and Planning,
University of Sheffield*

The process involved in acquiring a PhD is as important as the degree itself. Attending supervisory meetings, partaking in reading groups, workshops, and informal discussions with peers, among other activities are all significant in shaping the journey towards a PhD degree. Importantly, attending academic conferences is among the key activities that enlightened me and opened up diverse conversations about my PhD. This became evident after I attended my very first international conference in South Africa, a year and half after starting my PhD. This conference offered me excellent experiences which, to this day, has equipped me in my PhD journey and enhanced my engagement in subsequent conferences.

Preparations before the conference

The moment my abstract was accepted, I realised the conference had begun. The preparation/ correspondence phase, involved drafting my conference presentation and at the same time keeping track of all email messages concerning the conference. Since I did not have a paper readily available, I had to start thinking about the presentation three months before the conference. Out of anxiety, I completed a first draft of the paper within a month. This gave me adequate time to organise my thoughts and make my paper more coherent and complete for presentation. For some people, they may already have a draft of their paper at the time of abstract submission.

Nonetheless, it is very important to revisit this draft in the days leading up to the conference. During this period, I had enough time to arrange my flight and accommodation and to respond to all corresponding emails about the conference. Keeping track of my email kept me updated on the conference schedules and I had the opportunity to edit my final abstract and bio details before the programme outline was finalised. We sometimes procrastinate at this phase until the last minute and the outcome is mostly frustrations and stress, which is the worst feeling to have before setting off to a conference.

"Paying attention and preparing thoroughly, not only equipped me to be organised from the onset but it also boosted my confidence about the entire conference."

Attending conferences is part of the PhD adventure, and preparing adequately, positions you to draw much benefit for your research. Conferences are very relevant as they highlight recent developments in your research field and more importantly, build your confidence as a researcher, a tool every scholar needs to push their intellectual agenda.



CONFERENCE DRESS CODE

Smart is better than casual

It's always better to dress up than down. While "business wear" can mean a full suit for some folks and jeans and a nice top for others, it's better to be the only guy with a tie than the only one without.

For women, skirts and dresses are fine, but nothing too tight or short, as this can seem unprofessional. A nice blazer or scarf can dress up a plain outfit.

Dressing for presenting

If you're presenting for the first time, remember that your presence can be nearly as important as your presentation. In order to seem professional and poised, avoid large jewellery or busy prints, and make sure your hair is not hiding your face. Women can wear heels, but make sure you're comfortable walking and standing for an extended period of time.

Aside from this, whatever you're wearing you should try and be as confident as possible when presenting. Squaring your shoulders, standing straight and having your legs at shoulder width apart is a body position that suggests confidence and authority. Doing something like this makes you look assured and assertive, which is just as important as looking smart.

Simply ask

Finally, if you're unsure of the basic dress code for a conference, don't be afraid to ask. Some disciplines are generally more formal than others. The conference organisers should provide you with guidelines, but it's perfectly fair to bring it up if it's unclear.

Moreover, don't feel pressured to completely let go of your personality in favour of a professional wardrobe. As long as you feel comfortable, you're more likely to come across as confident. Interpret our suggestions as they make sense for you, and just remember to bring a few extra options for surprise occasions like extra dinners, unexpected weather changes, or other unforeseen circumstances.



Finding, Funding, and Frequenting Conferences

Harry Robson, PhD student in the department of Chemistry provides his take on finding, funding and frequenting conferences.

Conferences are such a key part of being a doctoral student, and yet many of us have such different experiences. I have known doctoral students who have had a plethora of different conferences suggested to them by their supervisor, and ready funding available, as well as those with no recommendations, and no funding. Some students go to many from their first year onwards, and others only one, and not until their final year. The benefits are self-evident: presenting research, networking, and listening to talks both inside and outside our own areas of research. But for those with little support, how is one meant to organise the attendance of one?

Finding the conference

The easiest way in which to find conferences is either through word of mouth or via the professional or academic societies and mailing lists relating to an individual discipline (Google is your friend for finding these!). I myself have found many through my membership to various “divisions” and “interest groups” within the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC).

Funding the trip

Funding however is trickier; most departments have a degree of funding for such trips, and some PhD funding sources provide some also, although in neither case is this always sufficient to attend all we would like. Sources of funding can often be found in the same professional organisations which advertise the conferences, as well as other societies or organisations. Speak to academics and keep an eye for funding sources given at the end of talks or posters you see for ideas of where to apply. I myself have successfully applied for both the RSC’s travel grant, and the Armourers & Brasiers’ Company’s travel grant. The conventional wisdom is that not much contribution, beyond sustenance should come from the students own pocket. (Although I myself have broken this rule before, even going so far as to fully fund my own attendance on one occasion, although it is not to be recommended!)

Attending and Networking

Once a conference has been found and the funding required to attend obtained, then it’s time to attend. Of course while it is generally more fun to go with others from the same group or department, it is okay to go it alone, and in-fact this tends to force the dreaded “Networking”. Networking once there is something I myself have always struggled with, but this does not mean I can give no advice! Queues for drinks put on at these conferences can often be a good place to strike up a conversation. Asking people about their research in a poster session is also fantastic. If you’re feeling nervous or awkward in these somewhat forced networking situations, there are always others who are aswell, and complaining about networking is always a good topic of conversation! Finally if alcohol is laid on or the conference heads to a bar after the talks, be careful! It can be very easy to stress-drink a little too much and say something you might regret!

So what are the benefits from networking? Once again my success has been limited here, but becoming a recognisable face can’t harm job prospects! There is also the potential for setting up collaborations, which is something I am currently looking into myself on the back of a conference. Further, you will undoubtedly get some good tips (and some bad!) on your research from these things, especially if you present your research. And also don’t worry, it does get easier! You learn to stop giving so much of a damn about it!

“I think the most important thing to remember at conferences is enjoy it, but try not to overdo it.”

Remember you’re only a PhD student for a very short time - make the most of all the opportunities you are given, but equally for the longer conferences, you may need to take a morning off the talks in order to give your head a rest. Overall though enjoy yourself. Happy conferencing!

Budgeting an academic event

Helen Cowen, Research Development Support Officer, Research Services

If you've volunteered to organise an academic event it's going to raise your profile amongst the researcher community, give you lots of opportunities for networking, and it will look great on your CV. There are a number of factors which can determine whether or not an event is successful, one of which is bringing the event in on budget. If it's your first time budgeting an academic event here are a few tips (in no particular order) which may help:

- 1** Don't procrastinate – the sooner you start to plan your event and your budget, the more time you have to refine your plans and source information, the better the end product will be.
- 2** Define what kind of event do you want to host and who will your audience be? Once you have this information, you can start to get an idea of what costs will be involved.
- 3** Create a spreadsheet – record everything on it and this will become your best friend. As long as you keep accurate records of your income and your expenditure your budget should be fine.
- 4** What do you want to include in the programme? Make a list of all possible expenditures and split them into categories e.g. venue, AV, catering, printing, speakers, etc. Each item in every category needs to have a separate line on the spreadsheet so that you can track the cost – you can never have too much information when it comes to the budget.
- 5** Research – get quotes and definitive prices for every item on your list. Seek advice from people who have planned similar events before. Are there established/preferred suppliers you should use? Be realistic with the prices.
- 6** Find out if suppliers will be charging VAT on top of the prices quoted. Not all suppliers make this clear and the additional costs can mount up. Make sure that you include the final total amount on your budget.
- 7** If you're providing catering/refreshments at your event, it is often recommended that you book for 75% of the expected delegates as there are always people who can't attend on the day. Look for suppliers who offer the best value for money; this doesn't necessarily mean the cheapest.
- 8** Find out exactly what funds are available to you; has your faculty/department allocated money to contribute to the costs or are you expected to generate the income yourselves by charging a registration fee? Reflect on the proposed programme and identify non-essential areas which could be removed without affecting the overall experience.
- 9** If you decide to charge for places will you provide discounted or free places to organisers and/or speakers? Discounted/free places need to be factored into your budget and you must ensure that the cost is covered by the sale of other places.
- 10** Create a contingency fund (at least 10% of your overall budget) for unforeseen costs. Don't be tempted to dip into this for anything other than an emergency.
- 11** Make sure that all of your organising team knows what the budget is. It's a good idea for one person to have overall control of the budget and approve the spending of other team members.
- 12** Set a deadline for registration. This is probably a really obvious suggestion, but doing this will help to avoid last minute bookings and you'll know the number of attendees your budget has to cover.

The 12 tips above are lessons which I've learned or have been shared with me while I've been organising academic events. They are by no means the only way of doing things, but they might just get you started on developing your own successful approach to budgeting an event.

A woman with long brown hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is wearing a grey sweater and a black jacket. She is holding a blue folder or binder. In the background, other people are visible, including a man with a beard and another woman with dark hair. The setting appears to be a conference or meeting.

Things to remember DURING attending a conference

- ◆ Use the networking opportunities
- ◆ Make good use of Twitter
- ◆ Share note-taking
- ◆ Look out for spontaneous discussion sessions
- ◆ Acknowledge the contribution of others
- ◆ Sleep well (or try to) and drink a lot of water

Getting the Most out of Conferencing

Elisabeth Kugler, PhD student studying biomedical image analysis in cardiovascular research, shares with us how she makes the most of the conference experience.

During my PhD at the University of Sheffield I learned that you can simply attend a conference or you can make it an experience. I choose the latter and I do so by preparation, setting goals, and after-conference admin.

Networking

Conferences are a great networking hub, but it can also be exhausting to network for days whilst listening to cutting-edge science. I learned that setting myself a measurable and realistic goal for networking is essential. Hence, going to a conference I will try to speak to at least three new people and learn about their work.

Being nervous is normal

No matter how many talks I have given, I will always be nervous and so are most people. Preparation, reading, and rehearsals help with feeling under control and knowing you prepared to the best of your abilities. Everyone deals differently with nervousness, but you can try a myriad of techniques to deal with nerves and help project your voice. The most famous techniques to mention are power-poses, combat breathing, diaphragm training, and breathing meditation. The key is finding out what works for you.



 Elisabeth Kugler
 ekugler1@sheffield.ac.uk
 @KuglerElisabeth

“Always keep a notebook and never assume that you will remember - because usually you won’t.”

Coffee breaks and dinner are essential interaction points

Listening to scientific talks can be mentally exhausting. Use session breaks to get some fresh air, walk around, and network. Breaks and dinner are usually less formal and are great opportunities to talk about science or life in general. If you can, do not miss out, but also make sure you are taking down time when needed.



Presenting at my First Conference

We asked Leonardo Stella, PhD student in the Department of Automatic Control and Systems Engineering, a few questions about presenting at his first conference.

When was your first presenting experience?

The first conference I presented at was Mediterranean Control Conference in Malta (July 2017), when I was asked to co-chair the session on "Game Theory, Biologically Inspired and Complex Systems". This is a rather big annual conference, but nothing as big as the 20th World Congress of the International Federation of Automatic Control (IFAC) in Toulouse, France which I attended the same year following this conference.

How did you find out about this opportunity?

These conferences were recommended to me by my supervisor and I also heard about them from other colleagues and staff members. I had to prepare a 15 minutes presentation for each of them which took me many hours to prepare, but the experience I gained helped me for future events.

What presenting advice would you give other students?

I was quite nervous before the session started as many people are, one suggestion I can give is to rehearse the presentation several times in order not to depend on it. Practicing in front of friends, colleagues, or your research group, can help you fix problems and give you good advice before the big day. Co-chairing this session made me feel more self confident and the preparation work helped me during the presentation.

Were there any parts of the conference that you felt unprepared for?

The part where I was not well prepared was the Q&A part at the end of the session. Fortunately, I received some simple questions and I could answer them thoroughly, but this experience taught me to always try to question yourself and try to predict what kind of doubts you are leaving in the audience.



How did you find the networking experience during conference?

I didn't do much networking on my first conference, except with other people coming from Sheffield. But it was only later, on my second conference, that I actively engaged in networking with other PhD students and academics. After my presentation, my supervisor introduced me to some of the most important academics in the field, who he knew personally.

From your experience, what networking tips would you suggest for future events?

The biggest suggestion I can give is to introduce yourself and mention some of their work that particularly interested you. Maybe you can also try to link one aspect of your work to theirs and ask their opinion on it.

I found the tutorial sessions I attended at the conference, were the best place for networking with academics in my field. The tutorial sessions deal with more general topics which could be useful for your research and give you the chance to have a discussion with the academics presenting. This was especially useful because of the importance of the content to my research, and I could ask suggestions on specific issues or even discuss possible extensions and collaborations. You might end up having some good literature via email, for instance. Or they might end up being your external examiner for your viva, as happened to me.

Presenting Tips

Essential top tips when preparing for a conference presentation from Oliver Jones, Peter Portius and Roger Lewis

Practice makes perfect

Remember that you only learn by doing it (repeatedly) - practicing in front of peers can build your confidence and calm nerves.

Know your audience

Prepare your presentation to suit the expected knowledge level. You can ask your supervisor or see if there is anyone who has gone to a previous iteration of the conference. Be aware that you may talk to a potential future employer.

Prepare in advance

Get your slides reviewed, practice, check out the room you are presenting in when you get to the conference. Ensure you load up any slides or videos early and check they are all okay to go.

Q&A session

My general advice is to be friendly, write questions down at the Q&A section (your mind can go blank by the time you get to answer), and acknowledge if you don't know something (you can find out about it).

Keep it simple

Don't overrun more than 20 minutes!
Try not to over prepare your presentation - they will sound rehearsed, not natural and too fast. This can add to nerves on the day.

Designing a Conference Poster



Poster sessions are a unique opportunity to share and gain feedback on your research at academic conferences. These sessions often take place during networking breaks or lunch and normally there are multiple people presenting their posters at once. As with conference paper presentations, delivering a poster session can be a great way of sharing your work and increasing its profile.

How to prepare

When preparing your poster it's important to know your audience and identify your message before you get started. When telling your story have a clear narrative and keep it concise.

The most important thing to remember is to make it visual, using photos and graphs that are relevant to your research. Using the right mix of text and images can make your poster stand out and have visual appeal to people passing by.

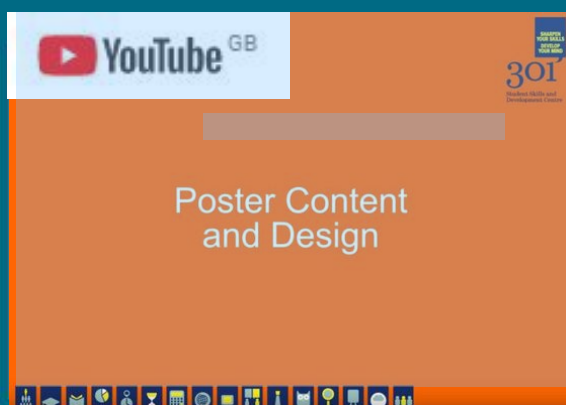
Here are some dos and don'ts to make them effective:

Dos

- Have a short, catchy title
- Focus on the message you want to get across
- Make it visual, using graphics and photos to tell the story
- Cut down on text, using bullet points and headings to make it easy to read
- Keep the sequence well ordered and obvious

Don't

- Use too much text; your poster should be a visual aid
- Clutter the page, make sure to leave spaces
- Use dark colours
- Use comic font types, make sure your text can be read from a couple of metres distance



How to engage with the audience

Prepare a two or three minute overview or elevator pitch explaining your research, then use this to guide people through your poster.



Presenting a poster is a very social event with lots of people and interaction. The event can become loud, so ensure you speak up when engaging with the audience. Use your poster as a tool to present your research, using the graphs and pictures on your poster as visual aids.

A good way to engage with your audience is to not only talk about your work but to discuss other researchers' work and make comparisons. This can also give you new ideas and help you look at your own research in another way.

Bring business cards and dress well, you never know who you might meet - this could include future employees. If presenting in a group, work out who is talking about each section. Be prepared to talk to a broad audience. Not everyone will be knowledgeable on the topic, so think about how you'd explain your research to someone outside the field.

Useful Links

[301 Posters](#)
[Presentations](#)

[Think Ahead](#)
[Poster](#)
[Presentation](#)



Wellbeing Support

Managing Anxiety and Conquering Unwanted Nerves

Whilst attending conferences is a great experience with endless benefits, the thought of presenting at one can leave us feeling anxious. Don't let this put you off! Anxiety is a completely normal emotion and is something everyone feels before presenting at a conference, There are a range of methods we can use to help tackle those unwanted nerves.

We spoke with Robert Barnsley, a Mental Health Support Manager for the University Counselling Service, to discuss what anxiety is and the best techniques to manage these feelings.

Anxiety is something we all experience and is a completely normal response to situations that we see as threatening to us. New situations will cause anxiety and unwanted worry. However presenting at a conference, whether it be your first time or hundredth, can cause the natural feeling of anxiety. Anxiety at a low level can be helpful when needing to perform or present in front of others. The adrenalin produced when we are feeling anxious can make us more alert and perform well. It can help us feel motivated and step out of our comfort zone. High levels of anxiety can feel unhelpful at the time but these feelings are perfectly normal and part of our animal instincts, related to the fight or flight response. We can help cope with high levels of anxiety by being prepared for the situation ahead.

Conquering unwanted nerves on the day

Everyone has their own methods when it comes to dealing with anxiety, depending on your personality and character. Here are a few tips that may help to reduce some of those unwanted nerves on the day, but it's important to find what works best for you.

Relaxation

Mindfulness can help to relax the body and mind, reducing anxiety levels.

Be well rested

Having a quiet, early night the day before will help you feel more alert on the day.

It's all in the breathing

Breathing exercises can act as a distraction and ensure our oxygen levels are stable.

Over preparing

Don't over practice on the day, this can make you worry more and make your anxiety worse.

Reduce the pressure

Don't put too much pressure on yourself, see it as an experience that will help you develop.

Signs of anxiety in your body

Headache - caused by constant worry and tiredness

Trouble sleeping- as a result of worry and stress

Breathing rapidly - anxiety can cause rapid, shallow breathing

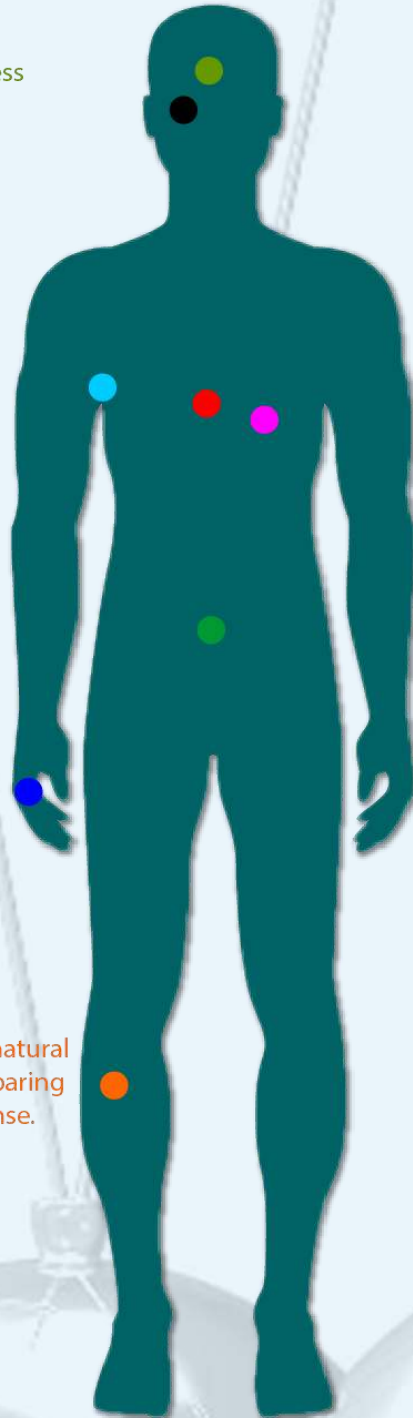
Feeling hot - resulting in sweating or hot flushes

Increased heart rate - you may feel your heartbeat quicken as a result of anxiety

Stomach ache - may be accompanied by nausea

Pins and needles - caused by hyperventilation

Feeling cold and shaky - a natural response to your body preparing for the fight or flight response.



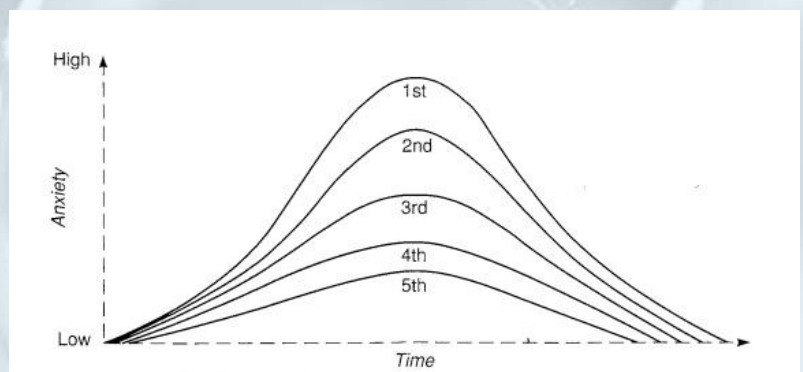
These symptoms will pass over time and can typically take up to 30 minutes on your first experience.

But the good news is that the more you practice, the easier it will get, and these unwanted symptoms will reduce.

The well known saying 'practice makes perfect' encourages us to continue to do something many times, so we develop our skills to a high level. This can help manage anxiety, by feeling prepared for the task ahead. Each time you put yourself into that situation your anxiety will progressively be less severe and reduce quicker.

Avoiding situations that create anxiety can lead to the development of phobias and loss of confidence. The best way to overcome avoidance and loss of confidence is by tackling your fears one step at a time. By gradually confronting your fears you can reduce anxiety associated with those situations.

The diagram to the right shows how the anxiety hill gets smaller and smaller the more we do something. The first time you present at a conference the anxiety will take time to subside. Each subsequent time you face the situation your anxiety will progressively be less severe and reduce much quicker.



Managing Anxiety

Preparation

Preparation is the key to feeling confident about your performance and reducing some of the anxiety you will feel on the day of the conference. Practicing your presentation with your supervisor can help you feel confident in your work and give you the opportunity to discuss any doubts you may have. It's also a good idea to practice in front of friends and colleagues, who can offer feedback and support. The more you practice, the more accurate and precise you will feel about your presentation. Feeling confident that you can plan a well-thought out presentation and deliver it effectively will help calm any nerves.

301 run a '[Planning and delivering presentations](#)' workshop, that looks at what makes a presentation effective, and what things we should consider when preparing for delivery. This could be helpful to anyone presenting for the first time at a conference, so you can go into your presentation feeling confident and well prepared.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can be a useful method of managing anxiety, if you feel things are getting out of hand. CBT is based on the concept that your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and actions are interconnected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap you in a vicious cycle. CBT helps you deal with overwhelming problems in a more positive way by breaking them down into smaller parts.

Unlike some other talking treatments, CBT deals with your current problems, rather than focusing on issues from your past. It looks at practical ways to improve your state of mind.

Mindfulness and relaxation techniques

Relaxation is an important aspect when preparing for your presentation and can help to reduce many signs of anxiety. By relaxing we can slow our heart rate, our breathing becomes slower and deeper, our muscles relax, and our blood flow to our brain increases. So finding the time to take a break and practice some relaxation techniques can make us more productive, increasing our focus and energy levels.

We all react to anxiety and stress in different ways and this can affect how we choose to relax. For some people mindfulness can be the most effective method, helping to regulate your breathing and focus the mind. Mindfulness helps to focus our minds on the present, and has been linked to lower anxiety and developing a stronger resilience against stress. It can be practiced anywhere, even whilst walking and can take just a few minutes. The University Counselling Service run [Mindfulness](#) workshops and [Hypnosis for Inner Calm and Positivity](#) sessions, which can be of great benefit when feeling anxious and stressed. To practice mindfulness at home you can also download the Headspace app which provides you with a range of mindfulness sessions and helpful tips. These can be particularly helpful for those of us having trouble sleeping.

Other people will react better to more stimulating and energising techniques such as a physical activity which uses both our arms and legs, for example running, dancing, swimming, or playing a sport can help. Interacting and talking with others during these activities can also help to reduce stress and worry. If active exercise is not for you yoga can also be a great way to relax both the mind and the body.

Deep muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation can be another effective technique to reduce anxiety that involves decreasing the tension throughout your body while calming any anxious thoughts. The technique involves tightening and releasing various muscle groups to lessen bodily tension.

It's important to find the best technique for you and make time to practice relaxation on a regular basis.

Finding support

The University takes your health and wellbeing seriously, and there's a wide range of support that you can access to help manage stress and anxiety during challenging times.

Student Support Services offer support through:

- [SSID](#)
- [SAMHS](#)
- [Counselling services](#)
- [Big White Wall](#)

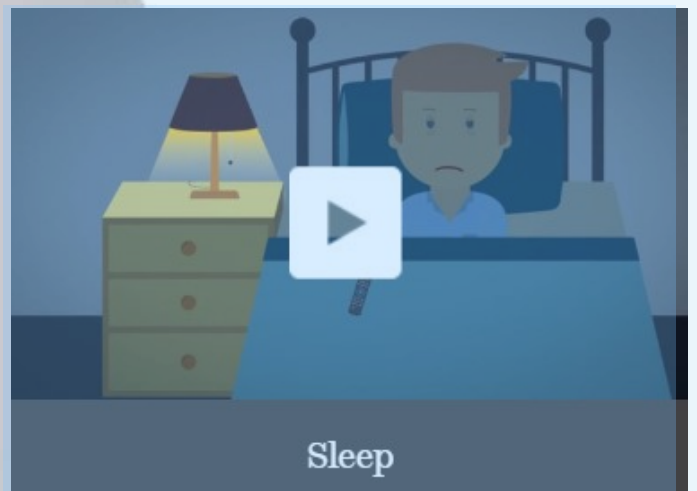
Sheffield IAPT offer stress control courses which provide you with proven ways to reduce stress, anxiety and depression as well as boost your self-esteem. <http://iaptsheffield.shsc.nhs.uk/stress-control/>

Recommended self help resources

The [counselling self help webpage](#) includes valuable pages for [managing anxiety](#) and [relaxation](#) for anyone who is feeling anxious in the run up to a conference.

These self help leaflets are also a valuable resource <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

Panic attacks and sleep video <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/sos>



Things to remember AFTER attending a conference

“One of the important things I did after the conference was to compile all the feedback I had on my presentation and from other informal talks. This became relevant along the way of the PhD. In addition, I re-established online contact with a number of people I met at the conference as soon as I got back and that became a platform for widening my networks, sharing ideas and exchanging academic materials, and other opportunities such as funding, conferences, and journal articles”.

“It is important to reconnect early after the conference as this is key to sustaining the networking done face-to-face. I realised that people I contacted later were less responsive compared to those I contacted as soon as I got back.”

*Divine Mawuli Asafo, PhD student,
Department of Urban Studies and
Planning*



Kennedy John Offor, PhD student in the Department of Automatic Control and Systems Engineering provides some essential after conference tips

Keep in touch with the connections you made

There is no point in networking with people at the conference if you don't keep in touch thereafter. It is important for you to plan ahead of time how to keep in touch with the people you meet at the conference. If you have done your homework well, you would have identified the people to network with and would have started the discussion before the conference. Taking on a handful of people to connect with will make it easier for you to keep in touch. Network with purpose. Don't be afraid to approach experts in your field. Most of them are willing to mentor early career researchers. Remember that it is a two - way relationship. Think of what you have to offer to those you are connecting with and what you want from them.

Reflect and share your experience with colleagues and on social media

Reflect on your experience and share with others. Sharing your experiences is one way of maximizing the benefits of every conference you attend. You could share this on LinkedIn, Medium, Twitter and other social media channels.

One way of immortalising and keeping your notes reachable is to share your experiences via Twitter and other social media channels live. In this way, you can find out and connect with other people attending the conference and inform those unable to attend of live events.

Achieving the Best Results

Alex James, PhD student, Department of Chemistry, University of Sheffield

During my three years as a PhD student I have made it my goal to fully immerse myself in the PhD experience and try and do as much as I can. As a PhD student, though it may be difficult to see at times, we are fortunate enough to be presented with opportunities people in other areas of work dare only dream of. For me, the apex of these – conferences!

Conferences are golden opportunities for so many reasons, I have been lucky enough to attend many conferences, both national and international and ranging from one day to one week during my studies. I have attended both alone and with my fellow group members and have presented both posters and oral presentations. Below are some top tips and advice on what I have learnt when both preparing for and attending these events.

Using your resources

Twitter is by far the most used social media platform by academics.

Seriously, when it comes to Twitter they are the equivalent of a millennial in a coffee shop who's just ordered the most perfect looking coffee – it's all about the tweet! For you this means that instead of a nice picture of a piece of cheesecake you can find out all about where they are going and when. Often academics organising conferences will also tweet about them in good time so this is a great way to stumble onto smaller meetings which your PI may have missed. As a recommendation I would suggest getting an academic twitter immediately and following anyone who works in your area and also the big journals/societies in your area. This will put you in good stead to stumble upon meetings and conferences that you may not have otherwise found and is also a good way to stay up to date in your area without looking through 30 different journals.



Research the event/location

What you do before a conference completely depends on your motivations for attending. If you are there to present work then obviously work on your talk/poster beforehand. Try to tailor the talk to your audience and make sure whatever you present you are comfortable talking about because you will get questions immediately after and also in all of the breaks too!

As soon as the conference booklet is released, have a look at who is talking and presenting posters and see if you recognise any of the names. If you are looking to make contacts and network this is particularly useful as it gives you an idea of their research interests, which can help spark conversation.

I would also recommend researching the location, especially if its international, as this will help you know what to see while you're out there and help you find a place to stay too.

"Book accommodation asap as prices sky rocket nearer the time as the demand get higher!"

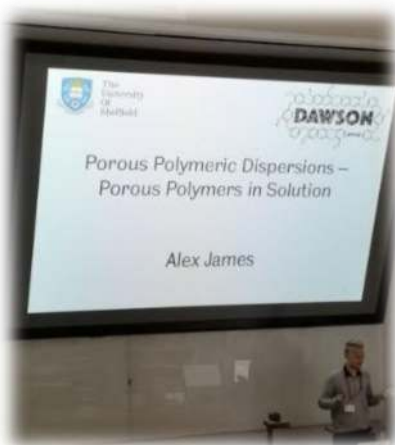




Ask questions, don't be shy, and enjoy it!

When attending try and make the most of your time there and most importantly DON'T BE SHY!

You have to make the most of this opportunity so during talks ask questions (there are no stupid questions), speak to people in your area (both PhDs and PI's) look at the posters and discuss them with the presenters.



Try to forge collaborations, jot down email addresses of people and be sure to follow up after the conference. If you are there alone make an effort to talk to people, it can be overwhelming but it's an exciting opportunity and people do want to socialise and chat.

No doubt you will recognise names from papers you have read and this can be a good way to initiate a chat. "Oh, I see you work for Prof. X, what are they like?" or "My PI was at this university he worked for Prof. Y, do you know him?" These are great ways to initiate a conversation and can lead to interesting discussions.

Stay in touch

The best advice I can give with regards to conferences is to simply know why you are going, read up on who is talking/presenting work, ask questions and network, and follow up via email afterwards. Make the most of twitter as it's a great way to make contacts and stay in touch afterwards.

Have no regrets

Most of all enjoy your time there, remember to explore the area too (it doesn't have to be all work!) and don't go away from it wishing you had asked that question or chatted to that person in your field.



TOP TIPS

The ultimate tips for attending PGR conferences from: Oliver Jones, Victor Chidi Wolemonwu, Nathan Archer & Kennedy John Offer

Before the conference

- Apply early to take advantage of discounted tickets
- Tweet about your presentation preparation
- Print business cards
- Make contacts ahead of the conference creating opportunities to meet up with colleagues



Plan the sessions

Before arriving I would advise having a look at the timetable if possible as the start can be quite chaotic and if there is a specific session you want to see having an idea of it before hand is useful.

Set objectives

Have a clear objective of why you are attending the conference. Go through the abstracts of other presenters to have a glimpse of what to expect during the conference.



Presenting your paper and getting feedback

Keep your presentation simple and start by introducing yourself. Remember to include link to your slides and the DOI at the beginning and end of your presentation. After your presentation pay attention to the feedback from your audience. You can arrange for some of your colleagues that attended to help you in taking notes from the audience while you focus on answering their questions.

Travel & accommodation

Read about the city where the conference will be held. If you are going to provide your own accommodation, you need to start early to make enquiries on the best place to stay, which would be both decent and affordable, and close to the venue.

Schedule tweets with the link to your talk

Twitter has become an essential part of science communication and the conference-going experience. Most major conferences and even several smaller ones have their own hashtags you can follow and use. Searching the conference hashtag is a great way to find out who else is at the conference and learn about panels or sessions that might not otherwise catch your eye. Live-tweeting the conference is a way to connect with other attendees, discuss sessions in real time, and share information with people who weren't able to attend. Through Twitter you can even follow a session happening in another room if you have a scheduling conflict. And remember to figure out in advance the hashtag of the conference you will be attending and add the hashtag to all your tweets - that way all conference participants will be able to find your messages.



Making contacts

I think that possibly the most important thing you can do if you go to a conference alone is simply to talk to people. This may not seem like anything special but walking up to someone standing alone and saying 'hi' will make the entire conference a lot more fun for you. It gives you someone to talk to during coffee breaks (there are usually at least two per day) and any events that may be happening.



Networking

When networking (aka going up to a person you want to speak to), remember that you are speaking to a person that eats, drinks, and is human. They could be as nervous as you when approached, and are probably wondering if you are approaching them as a scholar or as a person.

Make the most of it

Finally, remember you are likely going to have travelled to a wonderful location during this trip, paid for by the university, so make sure you get to enjoy yourself. Take an extra day and explore the location or see if the conference is putting on any events that you can take part in. Who knows what you will experience, I have seen local performances as well as ninjas in a banquet so anything's possible.

Follow up

Don't throw away handouts and conference papers. File them. They could be useful to you someday. As for your contacts, do well to send out emails, and ensure you let them know where you met them. Always communicate with them when you have something useful, or a project you wish them to collaborate with you on, or you need some expert advice.

