

15 minutes to develop your research career

Podcast Transcript

Episode 8: Academic conference tips

Claire Doffegnies: This is the [Taylor & Francis](#) and [Vitae](#) podcast on developing your research career. I'm Claire Doffegnies from Taylor & Francis.

Kate Jones: And I'm Kate Jones from Vitae. And in this podcast, we're going to be looking at some of the issues around attending and preparing for, and following up on conferences.

Claire Doffegnies: We'll be asking why go to academic conferences, and what can you get out of them?

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: It's more of an opportunity to network and meet people in your field, and get feedback on your work.

Claire Doffegnies: How can you get funding to attend?

Michael Rayner: Some actually are very lucky, and the grants you get for research you're undertaking do allow you to go to conferences to disseminate some of the early results.

Claire Doffegnies: What makes a good conference paper presentation?

Angie Lee Shaw: Really talking to that broad audience can really have a lot of impact.

Claire Doffegnies: And how can conferences develop your research and your research career?

Susan Brooks: If you give a presentation, suddenly everyone knows you.

Claire Doffegnies: We started off by asking some people at the Vitae Conference their experiences, and top tips for conferences.

Angie Lee Shaw: My name's Angie Lee Shaw. I currently work at the [University of Oxford](#), so it is part and parcel is going to conferences. So some can be heavy on technical language. So I think my best experiences have been where my original PhD supervisor said, "Oh, maybe it'd be useful if you met this person and that person." And I think my top tip would be, if you have those kinds of names in mind, get in touch with them in advance and book a little time to chat with them.

Julia Reeve: My name's Julia Reeve. I'm from Dumont Purdue University. You can use things like LinkedIn and Twitter. A tip that was given to me was before you go, search for everybody online and connect with them, so you've done the networking first. So you know what they look like. You know the people who've got similar interests to you.

Claire Doffegnies: You've made the decision to go to your first conference. So what should you expect to get out of it? And what can you do to prepare before?

Michael Rayner: I'm Michael Rayner. I'm the Dean of Research at the [University of the Highlands and Islands](#).

Kate Jones: Can you tell us a little bit about your experience of academic conferences?

Michael Rayner: My experience is mixed to the extent that I've been to many different types. Depends on the attitude you go into them with, to be honest. If you go into them in a slightly cynical way, then you can sometimes do yourself out of a really excellent experience. But if you go into them actually expecting that you're going to discover something new, to find out something that you didn't know before, to make contacts that you never had, that can open up new opportunities for you, then I think that's very good.

Pat Thomson: I'm Pat Thomson. I'm a professor of education in the School of Education at the [University of Nottingham](#). I have an academic writing and research education blog for doctoral and early career researchers called [Patter](#), which is probably how a lot of people know me.

If it's helpful to read the conference program beforehand, so you can think about, and be a bit strategic about what you might want to go and listen to and who you might want to get to talk with, because I think it's quite possible to go through a conference and just hear the same thing 20 times, or go to a set of things and actually find none of them particularly meet your needs.

So I think doing a bit of research about reading the abstracts and maybe even doing a bit research about some of the people just on their university web pages and stuff can be helpful at the start when you're still getting to know who people are.

Kate Jones: Do you have any do's or don'ts for researchers attending conferences, looking to use them to develop their careers?

Michael Rayner: Be prepared. Do a little bit of research into what actually the conference is about. Look at the sessions, be careful about your choice of the parallel sessions. Do look at them early because they get booked up quite early and you can therefore make sure that you get the choices you want to go to.

Certainly in terms of don'ts, I think a big don't is don't go and then isolate yourself in a corner somewhere and not interact with the folk who are there.

Pat Thomson: Another sort of choice you make about conferences, which is about whether you go to a very big general conference. In my field, for example, in the US, it's nothing to have conferences of 15,000.

And I think at the other end, you've got the kind of quite small invitational conferences that may only be 40 people, or they may only be a couple of hundred. They're often very focused, and so you

would find people who are working in very much the same area that you are, and you do tend to get an ongoing kind of conversation.

Some largish conferences, so 2,000 to 4,000 for example, organize themselves around special interest groups, and people may very often stay in a special interest group. And then there is the kind of developing conversation that goes on with people referring back to other papers that they've heard. And that's often particularly if you're a PhD person, that's not a bad thing to do, if you go to a medium-sized conference.

Kate Jones: How can researchers get funding to go to a conference?

Michael Rayner: Well, there's a number of different means, and again, it depends on the type of conference. Early career researchers sometimes have access to some resources. They're doing a PhD through some of the grants they may have supporting their PhD. Some actually are very lucky, and the grants you get for research you're undertaking do allow you to go to conferences to disseminate some of the early results. So you get funding that way.

Another way that you can do it is actually to make yourself available to take part in the conference, which reduces the cost and makes it easier then to be able to afford to go.

Claire Doffegnies: So you've chosen your conference, made it to the main auditorium and breakout rooms. But if you think you can sit quietly for the next three days, just listening to the presentations, many people would say that you're missing out on one of the most important parts of being there, and that's of course the networking.

Kate Jones: We spoke to Kieran Fenby-Hulse, assistant professor in research capability and development for his advice.

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: One of the biggest misunderstandings with conferences is it's an opportunity to present your work, which it is, but it's more of an opportunity to network and meet people in your field and get feedback on your work.

Kate Jones: Kieran, a lot of people in the kind of HE world will know you from Twitter. Can you say a little bit about the role that social media can play in helping you to network or build contacts at conferences?

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: So most conferences nowadays have some sort of hashtag back channel going on. So if you're not on Twitter, you're not part of that conversation. So it's an opportunity. It's like a room that you can't go into at the conference. So it's a really good opportunity to engage in not only again, preparing for the conference and meeting people beforehand, but also to discuss the ideas and learning and to meet up with people while you're there.

And I would say knowing people off Twitter makes going to a conference 10 times less scary. It's so that people can speak to you, you don't have the awkwardness, and I find actually most of the

people I speak to at conferences are now part of a Twitter network. And so actually it really does create a sort of sub-community or sub-group, and so it can be quite a powerful networking tool.

Claire Doffegnies: So if you can network a lot on social media, then why bother meeting people face-to-face?

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: I think they do different things ultimately, and they're both valuable. I think more and more virtual networking is actually can replace face-to-face in terms that, but Twitter in itself in that term, it's very short bite sized information in a public domain. So you're not having the conversations you would have face-to-face, in person.

When you meet someone in person, you learn more about who they are, their values, their interests, and they're the sort of things you want to know if you want to collaborate with someone. Is it a person I can work with well? And that really comes from face-to-face meeting. So there's a lot that you don't know when you're interacting online.

So they're both useful, depending what you're trying to get out of a conversation.

Kate Jones: That kind of leads into our next question, which is what can you do post-conference to kind of follow up and further grow your networks and have opportunities for collaborations?

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: So if you haven't put time in your diary before you go to that conference, you're going to find following up doesn't happen. So put some time, a couple of hours in your diary, over a few weeks to follow up with those email contacts, to go through those business cards you've collected or the people you've decided to follow on social media or LinkedIn.

Because you need to then push the conversation further. I met you at the conference. It was really interesting. I'd like to discuss where our work connects more. Those sorts of conversations and we don't do that enough. We kind of walk away and hope that someone's going to contact us because they really liked our presentation. But actually it's always a two way, three way thing. So you've got to go out and contact the people whose works interest you.

Claire Doffegnies: So some people might really love the idea of networking at conferences, but other people might find it a bit more awkward. So do you have any tips for people who are more introverted in nature?

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: So there's lots of advice and guidance on networking out there and a lot of it is aimed at extroverts, and it's the worst advice you can give to an introvert. Introverts can network. It's not that introverts can't. It just takes more energy and it can be more exhausting because it feels more awkward.

So for that, again, planning. Don't go to the whole social thing. Arrange meetings with people in smaller groups beforehand. So you can actually get a lot more from having a very bespoke approach and meeting a few people and having detailed, deep conversations than going around the room and speaking to everyone.

Claire Doffegnies: Suppose there's a senior academic that you really want to meet at a conference, do you have any tips for how you can go about introducing yourself to them?

Kieran Fenby-Hulse: Networking's a two way relationship. So don't think I'm taking the senior person's time. I'm an ECR and I'm wasting their time talking. They are learning from you too. They're learning what the cutting edge ideas in the field are, and they'll talk to you for as long as it's useful.

Some people are rude, don't worry about them. You wouldn't want to work with them. And some people are flattered that you've talked with them. So go up, give it a go. They're usually happy to find out what you're doing and that influences their thought, and they may want to partner with you.

Claire Doffegnies: So the conference is over and you've met new friends and potential people that you can work with in future, and now's the time to plan for your next conference. But this time you're going to think about presenting a paper yourself.

Professor Susan Brooks, director of research and development at Oxford Brookes shares advice on how to make a success of conference presentations.

Susan Brooks: I think if you want to be successful in your career, you really need to get your name known, and one of the great ways of doing that is to present at a conference and get yourself seen.

Kate Jones: What can researchers get out of delivering a paper to conference?

Susan Brooks: I think one of the really positive things about giving a presentation at a conference, especially early on in your career, is that very often we go to conferences and we're told we should network and we should make contacts and that sort of thing. And as an early career researcher, often you feel quite lost and you don't know anybody.

If you give a presentation, suddenly everyone knows you. And so you'll find that people will come up and talk to you at the receptions and the networking events, and that suddenly you'll be a focus of attention.

Kate Jones: What about paper presentation? What do you think makes a good paper?

Susan Brooks: So from a science background, I think what makes a good presentation, suddenly you need to think about the structure. You need to introduce the subject in a way that often a very broad audience will understand why your research is important and interesting.

I think sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that what we talk about has got to be terribly complicated and detailed, whereas actually often a very engaging presentation where you are... I think sometimes we worry about dumbing things down too much, whereas actually it's often the presentations where people have made things very simple, but very engaging that stick in your mind, and those are the really good ones.

Claire Doffegnies: So going back to your first presentation at a conference, do you remember how you felt?

Susan Brooks: I felt absolutely terrified and I think that's absolutely normal. I must have given dozens of conference presentations since, and I still feel absolutely terrified. I don't think that ever goes away. You learn to disguise your nerves maybe, but I think it's perfectly normal to feel really, really scared.

Generally the audience is going to be on your side. They're not out to shoot you down generally. They're out to be interested in your ideas and so on. And of course, in order to overcome your nervousness, there's lots of training and support available in most institutions to help you to deal with the nerves. And also the thing to do is just to practice and to make sure that you can be the best that you can on the day.

Kate Jones: What advice would you give to a researcher who's feeling really nervous about giving a presentation?

Susan Brooks: I think first of all, know that it is normal, that everybody giving a presentation, especially early on in their career is going to feel really nervous. I think definitely practice a lot, practice on your own, but practice in front of other people as well, even if it's only your mother, your girlfriend, your boyfriend, your dog. Doing it out loud is really, really important. For most people, once they get into it, they really actually enjoy it, even though it is an intimidating thing to start off with.

Claire Doffegnies: How can you make really good PowerPoint slides to go with what you're saying?

Susan Brooks: I think one lesson is not to make them too complicated. I go to conferences sometimes and people put up slides and they're just absolutely covered in tables and figures and data and graphs and my heart immediately sinks, and I know that I'm just going to struggle with what's coming up.

So I think have a simple message on each slide and also talk through what is actually on the slide. Don't assume that because you know what that graph is showing because you've seen a thousand graphs like that before, that your audience is going to know. So you need to actually talk them through what it is that you're showing and explain to them what they need to see from it.

Kate Jones: Can you give some advice on the dreaded Q&A?

Susan Brooks: I do some training for presentation skills at my university, and I'm always very surprised how many of our researchers say that they're worried about the Q&A. You have to believe that you know more about the talk that you've just given than anybody else, and so you're likely to be able to answer the questions. But also if you can't answer the question, that's fine. Nobody knows everything. So it's fine to say, I don't know, or that's an interesting question. I'll have to think about it or whatever.

Sometimes the feedback, the questions, things like that, that you get from giving a talk are really helpful in making you think about what else you need to do to the research to make it a complete story.

Claire Doffegnies: That's all for today. Thank you for listening. We'll see you here next time.

Speaker 8: I'd like to tell you about a new podcast series, "[How researchers changed the world](#)". Supported by Taylor & Francis, the series highlights the real world impact and the people in stories behind great research.

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