

# The last great unknown? The impact of academic conferences.

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*What do academic conferences contribute? How do academic conferences make a difference both in the lives of academics and wider society? **Donald Nicolson** looks at a few examples of conferences that have been able to make a demonstrable impact and argues it is to the benefit of the academy to learn more about how to get the most out of these time-consuming events.*



Over the course of two years in the mid-1960s, two academic conferences in strikingly different fields had a great impact on academic research that is still felt today to varying degrees:

1. In 1964, the 18th World Medical Association General Assembly held in Helsinki devised a set of ethical principles to guide medical research involving human subjects, now the basis for the ethical treatment of human subjects in medical research.
2. In 1966 at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore an international symposium entitled “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” laid the groundwork for the theory of ‘Post-Structuralism’ and in particular launched the career of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Each conference had an impact at the time, and half a century later both are still remembered. Is this true of academic conferences today or are these 1960 examples outliers?

My own reading is that the academic conference has to date largely evaded the empirical gaze. Attending and presenting at conferences is something nearly all academics do. More so, they expend great time and effort justifying attendance, applying to present and looking for funding to travel, let alone devising their presentations. So is it worth this effort or do conferences merely generate noise? How are conferences useful?



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In my book I reflect on how as a former academic I attended over 20 conferences, sat in on hundreds of

presentations and debates, presented over 20 times myself, heard countless people ask “questions”, and a similar number of replies. My hope was that at least some conferences go beyond mere noise, and are useful to the audience/stakeholders/the wider environment by having an impact. I followed up an immediate hunch, and then further examples arose from the interviews I conducted. This blog looks at a few of those examples. They are not meant to be comprehensive of the academic conference experience but are meant to provoke discussion on the impact of conferences.

## **Debate on Tangible Issues: The 11th Annual Cochrane Colloquium**

In October 2003 the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Cochrane Colloquium was held in Barcelona. This annual meeting attracts important figures from medicine and Health Services Research, who discuss issues around the conduct and findings from systematic reviews, a method for evidence synthesis. At the 2003 Colloquium there was a debate around conflicts of interests within the Cochrane Collaboration and how the Collaboration should respond to them. Conflicts of interest are a common problem in medical research when for example, a pharmaceutical company funds researchers to examine how well its new drug works compared with a drug already available on the market. The charge is that because the company wants its new drug to work better than another, it may have a surreptitious (or less implicit) effect on how the research was carried out, leading to a biased outcome in favour of their drug. A common example is where pharmaceutical companies' trials have gone unpublished, when the new drug was found not to have a beneficial outcome.

Some debates at conferences are theoretical, discussing a concept at an abstract level. The conflicts debate was the antithesis, having potentially serious ramifications for the Collaboration. For example, Ray Moynihan noted one of the concerns before the debate was that some Cochrane review groups might go out of business if they lost funding from pharmaceutical companies (Moynihan, R., 2003. Cochrane at crossroads over drug company sponsorship. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 327(7420), p.924.).

When a conference has a memorable presentation or stages an important debate/discussion, like the 2003 Colloquium, I think that it goes beyond merely generating noise and has impact. The Conflicts debate had impact in bucket loads. It challenged how the Collaboration received funding, and had potentially serious consequences for the employment of people.

## **Bringing Decision-makers to the Table: The 29th Triennial Congress of the International Confederation of Midwives**

A Professor of Midwifery Research told me about another conference, the 29<sup>th</sup> Triennial Congress of the International Confederation of Midwives in June 2011 where there was a push to make global maternity care a worldwide issue. The conference received support from the Government which enabled the Government to recognise the importance of the agenda around maternity care and in particular that it was vital to tackle health inequalities. The crucial aspect was that politicians spoke, which raised the issue to the political agenda and attracted media attention, enabling the possibility of change.

## **Impact on personal development**

Based on interviewing over 30 people for my book, I found that the search for ‘conference impact’ need not rest on a paradigm-defining plinth. For the period of time of the conference, the venue provides not just a place to work, but also a place to eat, drink and sleep; be that a hotel or University campus. Conferences are therefore not just workplaces for attendees; but are places where people ‘are being’, and as such, this can impact on their welfare. Being at a conference can present the individual a variety of opportunities, including networking, meeting overseas colleagues in person, or acting as a jobs fair. When respondents talked about conferences having an impact, they tended to speak about the personal rather than the disciplinary impact, e.g. how a particular conference helped their

career development, or inspired their work.

## The cost and value of 'impact' for conferences

An important point that my work raises is querying the usefulness of the question of 'Impact' for all conferences. My initial wondering about impact probably reflects my background in Health Services Research, where questions of effectiveness and impact abide. However, such a question is foreign to the Humanities, and so the notion of a presentation generating noise was nonsensical. For example, a Professor of the Humanities felt all talks were important and valuable. The 'noise hypothesis' is therefore perhaps relevant solely to quantitative-based presentations.

It might be considered that the notion of conferences having an impact is a reflection of neoliberal thinking where everything has a cost and a value. There was a suggestion that conferences value rests in them being able to highlight new trends and directions for research, framing the issues and alternatives for discussion, and holding sway over the key people at the centre of the field (Parker, M. and Weik, E., 2014. Free spirits? The academic on the aeroplane. *Management Learning*, 45(2), pp.167-181). Conferences might be in a good position to have such impact by presenting an infrastructure for a discipline to meet, disseminate and discuss. 'Value' need not imply the need for a cost-benefit analysis, but it is important to seek to understand this better as conferences are not held without purpose.

Perhaps it is better to ask how conferences make a difference. The conflict of interests debate at the Cochrane Colloquium was an example where a difference began to be made. By holding the debate, the Collaboration continued the process whereby it eventually rejected industry funding.

The academic conference as a subject of research might have a place in the evolving research discipline of meta-research, which aims to evaluate and improve research practices (Ioannidis JP, Fanelli D, Dunne DD, Goodman SN. Meta-research: evaluation and improvement of research methods and practices. *PLoS Biol*. 2015 Oct 2;13(10):e1002264.). Such an introspective turn, it might be hoped, would be for the benefit of the academy.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### About the Author

**Dr. Donald J Nicolson** worked in academic research for 13 years, and was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow. He now works as a freelance writer, and is writing a book for publication about academic conferences. He holds a Ph.D. in Health Services Research from the University of Leeds. He can be found digitally @the\_mopster, retweeting things that amuse him, venting his anger at the political environment, and making random observations on the absurdity of life. He has published several travel articles in a national newspaper <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/travel>.

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