

What should ECRs and PhDers consider when choosing a conference? Purpose, cost, and motivation



*For many early-career researchers and those studying for a PhD, settling on which conference(s) to attend can be a tough and fraught decision. So what is the most important thing to consider? **Pat Thomson** suggests three answers to this question, covering why you believe you should go to an event, whether it represents value for money, and whether or not you truly want to go.*

I've recently been asked how new PhDers ought to go about choosing academic conferences. Here goes...

Because conferences are discipline-specific, you really do need to talk with your supervisor and your peers about which are the best conferences to go to. Cop out? OK. I'll try to do better. I actually have three answers, take your pick.

Answer One: it's all about purpose

It's often helpful to think about the general purpose of conference-going, rather than any particular event. I tend to think about four purposes for PhDers and conferences:

1. Go to a conference where you can get the lie of the land – find out how an academic conference goes and what are its implicit rules and assumptions. Don't give a paper, just choose a conference where you can go to check out the field and the work in and on it. This is probably a conference where at least some of the key people are likely to be (hence why you need advice from those more knowledgeable in the field). You may well be able to have a quick chat with your reading list over coffee.
2. Go to an early-career researcher day where you can present your work in progress. You are also likely to begin to make some good connections at such an event.
3. Go to a conference which has an audience who you would like to engage with your work. This may be a niche conference, or one with specialist interest groups that you can present to, and follow, through a strand of the programme. You are likely to find other people with shared interests, and you also get to see current debates and emerging work in the field. Special interest groups are also often associated with particular journals, and by becoming familiar with the group through a conference, you also get clearer on how you might position your work for publication in their community's journals. You can almost certainly attend journal editor sessions or locate relevant editors in the programme.
4. Near the end of your PhD go to a conference where publishers are well-represented. You can make an appointment with an editor beforehand, or at the start of the conference, to talk through options for publishing your work. If your PhD is not book material, see above re meeting journal editors.

You can clearly add to these four types of experience – go to a huge conference to see what that is like; go to both a national general conference in your field; and an international general conference. And so on.

But be realistic about what a conference can do.

A lot of people suggest that conferences are good for networking. That's sort of true. Don't expect too much – you may not make instant networks. Networks are built on relationships and these can take more than one conference to build up. Often, people meet each other at one conference over a paper/coffee or through an introduction by a mutual friend, plan a shared symposium for the next conference, and then start to think about a joint paper or project. Don't be disappointed if you go to a conference and come away without a new network!

Answer Two: moneymoneymoney



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Conferences are very expensive. There are serious financial considerations to take into account when thinking about conference why, what, when and where.

1. Go to conferences which are just about free. These may well be local events held in your institution – these are not to simply be dismissed, as most universities do put on some good seminars and small conferences. Local events often have stellar speakers, some of them may even actually come from your institution. Free or nearly free events may be regional – perhaps held in between learned society annual conferences. Or they may be special interest group seminars. Or seminars or small conferences put on by large research programmes. Sometimes you need to be in a network to find out about these kinds of events, but social media can be a big help here, as can grad student associations, grad schools and self-help PhD groups.
2. Go to early career-researcher days. These are always cheaper than main conferences and often just as interesting.

And you know that, unless you're a full-time PhD at a generous university, you'll probably have to pay for conference-associated stuff yourself – so maybe you'll need to find cheap shared accommodation, deals on travel and buy your breakfast from supermarkets and dinner from food trucks. But you won't be the only one not going to the conference dinner – and you can usually find a group to go off somewhere cheap and cheerful. (I do all this too, BTW, even as a tenured full professor. I usually share an apartment with one or two others rather than pay for the recommended conference hotel. And wherever I can, I stay with friends.)

And why not ask the conference for a student discount or day rate if they don't have one? Maybe don't even go if the conference can't accommodate those on reduced incomes – it's outrageous if they don't – and let them and the world know why. And if you are part-time and your university doesn't have conference support, then you may have to get a little organised – this too is not really acceptable institutional behaviour. Your supervisor also ought to help in such circumstances – changing institutional policies is hard and PhDs can't do it on their own. And yes, I know that a lot of universities only fund conferences where papers are being presented – this also needs changing IMHO – see Answer One, Purpose #1.

Answer Three: do I have to?

I'm the worst person to answer any questions about conferences. I wish you hadn't asked. I really don't like conferences very much and I have cut my attendance right back. In fact, it's probably not going too far to say that going to a conference is almost my least favourite scholarly activity.

For starters, conferences are getting more and more expensive – see above – and that’s unjust; I don’t like the disparities that this creates. And yes, I do try to help PhDs and contract-research folk get to conferences – and yes, that means allocating money from my research budgets for that purpose. But an individual action hardly addresses the problem. We really do need to do something about the costs of getting together to do our jobs.

But even if conferences were cheap, I’d still hate them. I find it hard to simply *be* at an academic conference – rushing from room to room – or worse still, venue to venue – for papers where presenters never have enough time and where there is often no time at all to discuss. I often can’t manage a full day of sitting and listening. I get very antsy and have to skip a session just to break up the monotony. (And don’t start me on enduring hour after hour of crappy powerpoints.)



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I do go to a national conference every couple of years because I figure if I am doing a big research project then I need to be reporting to the relevant research community. I also like to take PhDers to this conference so that I can help them make a few contacts. I have a reason to go to this national conference – even if I don’t like it.

And I do go regularly – that is, most years – to a couple of conferences where I catch up with people and where I know there will be at least three or four papers that will be useful and interesting. More is an absolute bonus. (Low expectations means not being disappointed.) One of these two conferences is European and it moves around to interesting locations – I usually tack on a day or so with friends if it is affordable. So academic tourism bonus – I get to find out what is happening in Europe and also see a bit of it too. My other regular conference is at home in Australia and I combine attendance with seeing family. Being at the Australian event is also about keeping up with what’s happening at home and with people I don’t see often enough. I have a combination of personal and professional reasons for these two conferences. I do also attend the odd smaller event with a much more focused agenda.

But you know, having said all of that, hating conferences is probably not such a bad way to be – like being a cheap drunk I guess. You don’t have to do too much before you’ve had enough. And so you end up thinking carefully about avoiding the conference equivalent of a hangover, and you ration what conferences you go to and why.

You only conference when you have good cause. And I reckon that’s generally A Good Thing, whatever career stage you’re at.

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Pat Thomson is Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. Her current research focuses on creativity, the arts and change in schools and communities, and postgraduate writing pedagogies. She is currently devoting more time to exploring, reading and thinking about imaginative and inclusive pedagogies which sit at the heart of change. She blogs about her research at [patter](#).