

Australian Biochemist Students' Page

Getting the Best out of Scientific Conferences

Ray Norton advises on what to expect and how to optimise your conference experience.

I can still recall the first scientific conference I attended. It was an ABS (the Australian Biochemical Society, as ASBMB then was) annual conference, which happened to be hosted by the University of Melbourne School of Biochemistry, where I was an Honours student at the time. That was in the days when the conference ran under the old format and audiences could be rather thin at times, so the organisers were keen for the Honours class to come along to boost attendance at sessions. Even then, I was enthralled by hearing lectures from big names in the field, and a little bit relieved to see that they were not supermen after all. The experience of meeting leaders in my field continued to be an attraction of conferences for many years to come, during both my PhD and even more so as a postdoc in the US. These leading scientists whom you viewed with awe were human after all (although occasionally, when you had a chance to talk with their students or postdocs and find out what they were like to work for, it became apparent that this may have been an overly optimistic assessment).



Having the chance to get to know leaders in your field remains one of the big attractions of scientific conferences for students and postdocs. It can be a bit daunting to start up a conversation with someone you are in awe of, but most keynote speakers at conferences are absolutely delighted by the opportunity to speak with students and postdocs. You may well be a potential student or postdoc in their lab in the future. Even if that isn't the case, they are keen to hear what you are doing; after all, if you really want to know what is happening in a lab, you need to speak to those at the bench, not just listen to the sanitised version presented in a lecture by the lab head. And don't be afraid to question their ideas; science thrives on constant challenges to current accepted wisdom and seemingly naïve questions can sometimes lead to new ways of looking at a problem. Australian students are pretty adept at approaching leading scientists at conferences, more so than their counterparts in Asia (where language issues make the task harder), but probably not as forthcoming in this respect as students and postdocs from the US. Nonetheless, the whole task of getting to know these scientists is made much easier if the conference provides plenty of opportunities for socialising; free time in the afternoon and nightly socials (as at the Lorne conferences)

are a great example. If you're at a conference in Asia, karaoke sessions provide an equivalent opportunity (even if you have a lousy voice like me).

Many conferences these days organise student lunches with overseas speakers. I think these work best where the students are at a table with more than one speaker and where there is a chance to switch tables during the lunch. Try to spend time with the speakers who are interested in what you are doing, rather than those who just want to tell you what they are doing.

Another initiative that worked well at a conference I attended recently was organised poster tours. A senior scientist was asked to act as a tour leader, then students and postdocs signed up before the conference or on site to join each tour. The tour leader picked out six to eight posters and took the group of around eight people to each one, introducing the topic and pointing out why he/she found it interesting, then letting the conversation flow with the group. The poster presenters loved it because they had an audience, the tour group members found it valuable because they saw different perspectives on the topic, and the tour leaders got a kick out of catalysing the communication.

Most conferences these days (although unfortunately not all) offer prizes for the best student posters or talks. This gives you an added incentive to produce a top quality poster and also guarantees that you will have at least a few invited speakers come and discuss your poster. If you are aiming for a talk, then your abstract will have to stand out, so spell out the exciting results clearly (rather than saying, for example, that 'the results will be discussed'). Including references in the abstract to recent papers, published or in press, that describe your work is always helpful. Some of what you will present may have been published, but those selecting abstracts will probably take the view that there is a good chance that, if the work has already led to high quality papers, there are new and interesting results to follow.

It's probably stating the obvious, but another bonus of attending conferences is getting to know other students and postdocs in your field. This is fun at the social level, but in the long term, it can also be beneficial scientifically. Picturing some of these people as future lab heads or even heads of departments or institutes might require a huge leap of imagination, but some of them will be, and getting to know them early is a plus (the Great Expectations feature in the Australian Biochemist has many nice examples of the transition from someone who looked and thought just like you do now to someone who looks like your current supervisor or department head). Even if your current peers do not achieve those lofty positions in future, they can still be valuable sources of information and collaboration (not to mention welcome hosts in a strange city when you are travelling around the world later on). Try to get to know overseas students and postdocs attending the conference, as well as locals. Indeed, some conferences provide the opportunity, and even some funding, for local students to organise a social evening to which all students attending the conference are invited.

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It may seem that I have concentrated unduly on the social aspects of conferences rather than the scientific, but I believe that the opportunity to get to know your local and overseas peers, as well as leaders in your field, in a relaxed setting represents one of the major benefits of attending a conference. Even the least exciting conferences will have plenty of good talks and you will get to hear some great new science. Some of these talks will inspire you and some will give you ideas you can use in your own project; some may even scare you a bit when you see how much a big lab overseas has achieved (although don't ever let that put you off). But the really rewarding and long-lasting benefits will be the personal contacts you make. A conference is a reflection of science more broadly: there is a serious side, but it should be fun as well. So by all means party hard, but not at the expense of the talks; it's fine to stay out until 4:00am, but make sure you are at the talks starting at 8:30am the same morning. You should expect to finish a conference exhausted and exhilarated.

So look out for conferences that make an effort to enhance the experience for students and postdocs by holding student lunches, offering prizes for the best poster and/or oral presentations, and providing plenty of opportunities for social interactions with other students and invited speakers. And if you attend conferences that don't provide these benefits, then feel free to suggest to the organisers that they do so in future. Have fun!

