

» Conferences and Events

The ISSUES Project

“ACADEMIC CONFERENCES PROVIDE A SOCIAL SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO PRESENT THEIR WORK, LEARN ABOUT OTHERS’ WORK, AND INTERACT INFORMALLY WITH ONE ANOTHER”

(MCCARTHY ET AL., 2004)

WHY?

The ways in which conferences, events and symposia facilitate knowledge exchange fall broadly into two categories. The first category is dissemination – the key stated function of most events is to circulate information about ongoing or recently completed research amongst one’s peers. The unique strength of conferences is their responsiveness – they can be used by researchers to publicise or access cutting-edge developments at the forefront of their field. The comparatively short time period between research and dissemination is one of the reasons that over three quarters of researchers across a range of disciplinary groups regard conference presentations and proceedings as ‘very important’ or ‘quite important’ means of dissemination (Research Information Network, 2009).

Dissemination can take place through formal platforms involving oral presentations or poster displays, but the use of informal channels is becoming increasingly important. Conferences are not seen as fora exclusively for one-to-many broadcasts but also as opportunities for interaction and exchanges. Therefore, even rank-and-file delegates with no official capacity or presentation brief can spread their work through, for instance, question and answer sessions and informal socialising. Conferences offer the opportunities to disseminate information about ongoing work through the process of “mutual revelation” (McCarthy et al., 2004).

In the second category, knowledge exchange possibilities can arise from networking. It is widely known that building up a range of useful contacts plays a vital part in progressing an academic career, but networking can also bring about direct knowledge exchange opportunities. There is much more to knowledge exchange than dissemination alone. Nutley et al., for instance, identify a number of mechanisms for facilitating knowledge exchange, among them *social influence* and *interaction* (Nutley et al., 2007).

The argument here is that social influence and interaction are vital mechanisms for transferring academic information in themselves, rather than techniques to enhance the dissemination of findings. For example, they posit that via interaction with researchers, practitioners develop a better understanding of research outputs and how to access them. Conferences are arenas that promote interactivity and sociability between academics, policy makers and practitioners, and by being involved researchers can improve the chances of their work being used in real-world applications.



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HOW?

Research by the ISSUES group has suggested that practitioners and policy makers view conferences primarily as opportunities for networking rather than learning (Mason, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial that attendees be as sociable as possible. This not only applies to the hours of the conference itself, but to the meals and drinks receptions that might go along with it. Depending on one's preferences this may be a pleasure or a chore, but being disciplined in efforts to engage with a wide cross-section of attendees can be very beneficial in forging and maintaining connections. In professional environments, people regularly turn to their colleagues and associates for advice, so researchers will do well to use conferences to integrate themselves into practitioners' circle of colleagues. Researchers can do this by making themselves known and contributing intelligently to formal and informal discussions.

Additionally, conferences can be an excellent way to improve a researcher's understanding of how their work can have an impact in future. Many conferences can be useful for learning more about what practitioners genuinely need, so that academic work can be better tailored to meet the needs of its potential audience.

Although they may be seen as less important and prestigious means of communication than oral presentations, poster displays are commonplace at academic conferences and can be particularly useful for early-career researchers. They offer opportunities for both dissemination of research findings and to relationship building. Their strength in comparison to oral presentations is that they offer a "more intimate forum for exchange" (D'Angelo, 2010). Research into poster displays suggest that they need to have strong visual appeal if they are to draw the attention of delegates (surprisingly this is more important than subject area), and that they are much more likely to be successful if they are accompanied by the author (Rowe and Ilic, 2009).

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RESOURCES

SUE Dialogues Workshop:
tinyurl.com/6xa2aum

» Stories from SUE

One of the more interesting and successful SUE events was set-up by a group of researchers across several SUE consortia, who took matters into their own hands to promote greater interaction and awareness across the programme as a whole. The SUE Dialogues Workshop brought together consortia representatives, funders, practitioners and policymakers with the goal of advancing academic collaboration and developing an understanding of the future of research into sustainability.

Key to this was encouraging socialising amongst delegates by having them stay in the same hotel, eat together and take part in interactive poster sessions, break-out assignments and discussions. As a result, a number of delegates reported back to organisers that promising contacts had been made, acquaintances had been reopened and formative plans for collaboration had been drafted. This was essentially due to the informal knowledge exchange that took place over the two days, facilitated by the sociability that the conference fostered.