

Attending conferences

Part 1 - Opportunity and challenge

One of the PhD candidates interviewed during the research phase of the Premia project said: '**Attending conferences certainly was a challenge worth all the effort.**'

But conferences can make us apprehensive. You may have concerns about the feasibility of your attending conferences. Read the scenarios below.

- Do you identify with any of the students' words?
- Are there strategies which you could use to make attendance possible?

1. I feel very nervous about giving a presentation at a major conference.

Most researchers find giving a presentation daunting. Even the most seasoned and outwardly confident speakers are nervous beforehand. But giving presentations is part of being a member of a research community. You are investigating a new aspect of your subject – and sharing your findings is part of the process of expanding knowledge in that field. It is also a chance for you to receive feedback on your work which you can use to evaluate your methods and progress.

Practise presenting your work in progress to your peers within the university whenever you have an opportunity. It does get easier.

2. I don't know if I would be able to attend conferences because of the expense.

There are sources of funding to make attendance possible. Talk with your supervisor to identify where that funding is and how you can access it. If you have disability-related costs, they may be met by the DSA (Disabled Students' Allowances). Talk those costs through with the disability advisers at your institution.

3. I don't know if I would be able to go to conferences because the barriers are too high.

Investigate the barriers thoroughly. Are they practical e.g. accessible transport, personal assistance, accessible accommodation, the services of a BSL/English interpreter? Talk through the barriers with the conference organisers to see if some of the barriers can be addressed by them. Talk through remaining barriers with your disability service.

4. I am far too busy to go to conferences.

It could be the case that you need all your energies for your research. If you use assistive technology, have reading difficulties, use a great deal of concentration in lip-reading, are writing up your thesis and have language issues, then conference attendance may appear as an unnecessary and extra drain on your resources.

Against all of that, weigh up the advantages to your research; expanding contacts in the wider research community; getting fresh stimulation and ideas to reinvigorate your own work; stepping outside your own research and being able to look at it objectively when you return to it; having a good time with people who share common interests.

5. I would find it difficult to go to conferences because I wouldn't know anybody.

It is difficult for most of us to walk into a space where there are no familiar faces and where you may have to take the initiative to get to know people. But workshops, meals and social time create opportunities for make new acquaintances. Listening to others and asking questions make it easier than feeling you must talk about your research.

6. I would be concerned that going away to a conference could be detrimental to my well-being.

- If you think attending conferences will adversely affect your well-being, talk with the disability support service about how the impact could be lessened.
- Explain your concerns to your supervisor
- Weigh up the benefits of attending against the disadvantages
- See if you can attend part of the conference.
- Choose conferences that are local or regional.
- Look out for e-conferences which are becoming increasingly common.
- If there is a conference of particular importance, ask the organisers to send the papers to you or read them afterwards on the web.

Attending conferences Part 2 – Addressing the issues

Expectations

When you are some way into your research and beginning to uncover interesting things, your supervisor will often suggest that you attend a conference and give a presentation to colleagues in your discipline. This can be a golden opportunity for you to disseminate your emerging ideas or interim results, meet key figures in your field and lay claim to what is 'your' territory within the discipline.

But you will need to prepare carefully. Firstly, you should find out what the various media are for presentations - is it a poster presentation, a workshop or a formal presentation? Secondly, you will usually need to prepare a proposal for the conference organisers and send it to them for evaluation. Thirdly, if your proposal is accepted, then you need to prepare the poster, workshop or presentation. These may well have been covered in your research skills development programme, but you may also need professional advice from, for example, your institution's IT service or AV unit. You should also address identify and address in good time any disability-related issues so that you can seek funding and confidently negotiate any barriers.

Student perspectives

Here is what one student said about her experience:

While my fellow postgraduates write a paper and jump on a train or aeroplane, I have to: arrange funding for and find a non-medical helper willing to come; find and book accessible, often expensive, accommodation; find and arrange an accessible way to get there and ensure that the conference itself will be accessible. Underlying all that is an increasing and rising feeling of dread. At any point something could step in my way and the effort of the previous weeks could pour themselves down the drain.

PhD student with a mobility impairment

Addressing the issues

For some students conference attendance could present other barriers. If you think it may be problematic for you, look at the practicalities and the funding together. If you explore in advance what requirements you have and/or what support would enable you to attend a conference, then you can apply for funding under the DSA.

What are the issues?

1. Work out what will need to be in place to make it possible for you to attend and participate fully in conferences.

2. The conference organisers are responsible for making the presentations, workshops, meals and venues accessible to you. But they will need to know your requirements.
3. If you are giving a presentation and will need assistance in delivering the presentation, e.g. assistive software installed on the PC you will be using, someone to operate the remote control for a PowerPoint presentation, furniture laid out to enable you to lip read questions, then let the organisers know your requirements.
4. Look at your requirements relating to travel, accommodation and personal assistance.
5. Talk with your disability adviser and your supervisor about barriers that you have identified and seek support in making attendance possible.

Financial support

If you have disability-related costs to meet in attending conferences, contact either your research council or the local education authority – whichever provides your DSA. If your initial assessment of requirements has already identified conference attendance, then the funding agency will have advance notice. But if you are asking for funding for a conference and that was not covered in your assessment report, you will need to justify costs.

Benefits of attending conferences

At the beginning of this section, a PhD student talked about the effort involved in arranging attendance at a conference. They have now made it.

Attending conferences certainly was a challenge worth all the effort...for two different reasons. The first conference I attended was in Philadelphia - getting the chance to see a bit of the world I'd not seen before and receiving an international perspective on my work was great fun and very rewarding. The second conference was a topic-specific conference and it was the first time I had the chance to listen to and converse with a collected group of people who were all working/interested in my particular area of research. It was a fascinating and inspirational few days.

PhD student with physical-mobility impairment (2005)

Meeting the challenges

Most research students are apprehensive about giving presentations to an international conference audience. UK GRAD enables you to look at the barriers and address them. You will find this information in the [GRAD School programme](#).

Further information

On-line

[Giving presentations](#) from Bournemouth University. Not specifically aimed at research papers but very practical advice on how to present, knowing your audience, referencing slides.

[Guidelines](#) on preparing, practising and delivering presentations from Southampton University.

Other

Wisker, G. *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2001) Palgrave Macmillan pp 305 -316.

Rugg, G and Petre, M *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research* (2004) Open University Press pp 182 - 190.

Section 11 Student resources Attending conferences (amended March 2007). These resources are outcomes of the Premia project based at Newcastle University (2003 – 06) and funded by HEFCE.