

Red Guides Paper 56

Conference tips: Getting the most out of your
conference experience

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(Editors)

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Red Guides address educational and staff development issues within Higher Education and are aimed at colleagues within the University and at other institutions. Some describe current good practice in Higher education, others evaluate and/or comment on curriculum development and many provide ideas for teaching. All are meant to stimulate discussion, initiate action and implement change.

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At several points in your career you will have to attend a conference. You may be formally presenting your work, either as a speaker or in a poster, or you may be there to listen to others. Regardless of whether you are speaking or listening, this guide contains some practical hints from conference attendees on how to ensure you get the most out of a conference.

At the 2nd North - East Universities Regional Learning and Teaching Conference, Kate Exley, National Teaching Fellow, conducted a plenary where participants were asked to pass on their own conference tips.

Northumbria University agreed to produce this Red Guide based on the collated tips and distribute against conference participants and beyond.

It is arranged in the following sections:

Before the event

During the event

Giving sessions

Attending sessions

Outside of sessions

After the event

Conferences overseas

We wish to extend our thanks to everyone who contributed, particularly to Kate Exley for generating the idea. A full list of contributors is given at the end of the guide.

Before the event

If you submit a paper proposal and are accepted, well done! If not, you will benefit from feedback from experts about your work which can inform future proposals.

You may have to put in writing what you want to accomplish at the conference in order to get funding but do it anyway for yourself.

Ask colleagues who have attended conferences in the past for recommendations. If it's a new conference, or, if you can't find anyone who has been to previous events, review the website for the quality and calibre of speakers/presenters and the relevance of the conference theme to your institutional mission/vision/strategies.

Consider why you are attending the conference and what you want to get out of it both personally and professionally. Keep these goals in mind during the event.

Think of the 3 main messages you want to give in your presentation/poster.

Take advantage of any 'early bird' registration or institutional membership that gives you a discount.

If you are new to the conference circuit and want to maximize your chances to meet and socialize, staying at the conference hotel can facilitate this.

Remember to check the conference web-site regularly to be aware of any changes or updates.

Scan the delegate list for people you would like to meet, e.g. who are from your research area. You may want to email them ahead of time with a clear succinct message as to why you would like to meet them. You may want to let them have your mobile phone number to arrange to meet on arrival.

Read the session abstracts and plan which sessions you want to attend but be flexible if you find out more information about any of the sessions when you are there which lead you to believe that the topic may be better represented on paper than in an actual presentation. You can change your mind.

When planning which sessions to attend, include second and third choices in case your first choice is cancelled or doesn't meet your expectations. If the latter pertains, you may be able to change to your second choice. Don't be afraid to leave a session that isn't what you expected - we've all done it and the presenters will not be offended. Ensure you note the room locations so you can evaluate how much time you have to get there between sessions.

If the conference does not provide one, it can be useful to make a chart with each day and time period and list your first, second and third choice of sessions. When you get the final programme you can fill in the room locations on this grid.

Select sessions which broaden your perspectives, not just ones in your area. Get out of your silo!

Google - some of the presenters beforehand for their biographies. Google - images so you know what they look like. Google - the conference venue if you can to familiarise yourself with the location and, possibly, the facilities beforehand.

Read some of the presenters' (in your research area) recent articles or preprints. Prepare some questions on their work or possible areas of collaboration (which will be a good reason to start a conversation at the conference)

Look at past conferences held by the same organiser and identify people who are invited to speak on an annual basis. These tend to be the 'tried and tested' popular speakers who have something worth hearing.

If you get delegates' names in advance, contact people and arrange to meet at the conference. Link up beforehand with people you know, internal to your institution and external.

Email colleagues in your discipline/area and tell them you are going to the conference. Suggest they look at the conference website and see if you can do anything for them whilst you are there.

Plan ahead. Know who and what you want to see. Pick 2 or 3 things you really want to pursue, your most pressing questions you would like answered or aims you would like to achieve. Anything else is a bonus.

Buy a conference notebook to staple business cards in; keep notes of ideas; people's names (and why you are noting their names!)

If you write any notes you make during sessions on the right hand side of the page, you can keep the left hand side free for action points. At the end of each day or near the end of the conference, you can collate these points into one list, marking them up to provide you with a plan of action, e.g.

- Urgent, short term
- Important, short term
- Research
- Long term

Check out if the conference organisers are looking for volunteer helpers. This means you can meet lots of people on the registration desk and you may also get a discount on some of the conference costs.

Is the conference looking for chairs for sessions? Volunteer. This can be a good chance to get talking to other participants.

They may even come over and talk at break times as you are a familiar face.

Take contact or business cards along. Depending on the 'tone' of the conference you can also take sticky 'contact' labels. Include details of your research/work interests.

Have a short summary of your own work to give people who are interested (especially if you have a poster or stall).

Get involved with any online discussions/blogs that may be set up beforehand. Just lurk or, if possible, contribute.

Remember to enjoy yourself too. Don't have to be networking every moment. It is okay to take time out and not be overly ambitious. You are 'working' much longer hours at a conference and it is fine to take a break. You'll definitely absorb more if you give yourself some down time!

Plan the 'debrief' before you go to the conference (so you have time and date in your diary).

If you want to take notes with your laptop, ensure that it is fully charged at least before the sessions that are most important to you. If you can, bring along a spare battery. Don't rely on the availability of nearby power points at the venue.

You might want to pack a camera to take pictures. It may be worth checking with the organisers first if/when it is permissible to take photographs.

During the event

Take a jacket or sweater with you since room temperatures can vary widely. A jacket with two pockets is particularly useful. Use one for your business cards and ones for those you are given, to avoid mixing them up!

Wear your name badge prominently so people can read it easily. Hanging your badge from one of the lanyards provided

tends to result in it being too low for most people to read easily. Take it off when you leave the conference venue. A badge identifies you as a non-local and easy prey for muggers and pickpockets.

Put your name on your file/bag. The last thing you want to do is lose those notes you have made on handouts etc during the day.

Don't lug everything around in the conference bag/pack. Bring a light bag capable of accommodating what you need on a daily basis, e.g. the conference schedule, a notebook and pen, highlighter, post-it notes, some business cards and, possibly, a bottle of water if this is not provided. Travel light!

Seek out other 'first timers' or ask conference organisers to put you in touch with others (Some conferences give first-timers different coloured badges to identify them and encourage attendees to seek them out).

Icebreaker questions:

- "I am from ..., where are you from?"
- "I am [job role]...what do you do?"
- "Have you been to [venue] before?"
- "Is this your first [organiser] conference?"
- "What is new at your institution?"
- "Have you attended any good sessions?"
- "Have you learned anything new today?"

Given that you might be on the receiving end of some of these icebreakers, rehearse a couple of sentences you can make which helps you look professional during such conversations and gives the other person a quick overview of your work before moving on. If someone is interested they'll ask for further detail, and you can expand.

Strike up a conversation with people who look a bit lost or on the fringe and introduce them to others you know.

You are likely to be standing in queues for coffees and lunches, use the opportunity to network with the people in front and behind you.

Be positive - no one wants to be involved with a complainer. You are more likely to be remembered in a positive light, if your own contributions are positive.

Ask other attendees for recommendations for books, websites or other conferences. Being an active participant in your own learning can ensure the relevancy of the conference experience.

It is okay to plan other activities outside the conference agenda. This can aid personal development and networking.

Make notes on any key conversations you had at *least* at the end of each day to help you remember them when you get back to work.

Very often award-winning contributions – papers and posters communications – are a feature at conferences. Check these out for creative approaches being taken elsewhere by others. Talk to the winners if possible. Share good practice!

Giving sessions

If presenting, prepare well. Get some tips on presenting, give a talk to colleagues and incorporate their feedback.

Have self belief. If your research/work is interesting to you, it will be to others...

...But be prepared for not everybody to like it!

Post your handouts to the conference organisers for inclusion in the pack.

Send out a list for people's emails if they want to find out more about your presentation/poster

Doing a poster, make smaller copies for people to take away. You may also want to distribute other hand-outs

Try to present early in the day. This not only gets it over with so you can relax and enjoy the rest of the conference but also gives time in the afternoon for people to talk to you about it.

Attach a business card to any hand-outs you give out as a presenter.

Attending sessions

If you want a good seat at a session, arrive a little early. If you're late, don't hover at the back of the room or in the doorway, get yourself a seat. If you end up standing for an hour you are likely to regret it!

If you end up sitting at the back of the room you and have a private question for the presenter post-session, you will be outrun by several people on your way to the podium! This may make all the difference between getting your question answered on the spot and having to email the presenter afterwards. Also, bear in mind the room needs to be made ready for the next event and/or the speaker may have to rush off to another commitment.

'Private questions' are those specific to you. During sessions avoid asking these. General questions that will benefit everyone are more appropriate during the actual session. If you don't get a chance to ask the question specific to you afterwards, you can always follow up with an email.

Turn off your mobile phone or set to vibrate mode to avoid potential embarrassment of receiving a call mid-session.

Try to attend the opening plenary as this will give you something in common to talk about with other delegates you meet for the rest of the conference, given that you may all subsequently be attending different strands/sessions.

Agree with colleagues going to the same conference which sessions you will attend so you can get a good spread of coverage.

During sessions try to think who in your institutions might also be interested in what is being said so you can feed back to them later.

View each session as a source of ideas or as a trigger for ideas relevant to you and your institution. Actively listen for such nuggets of information. As a change from note-taking you can plot ideas on a chart. The vertical axis can indicate how easy/hard it would be to implement the idea in your institution. The horizontal axis can indicate how great/limited would be the impact on your institution if the idea were implemented. Look for the easy to implement/high impact ideas!

If you want to ask a question but are afraid to ask it in the session in front of everybody, don't be nervous about approaching the presenter informally over coffee afterwards

Precede a question/comment in the Q&A section of a presentation by stating your name and organisation – this helps audience know who you are and can give context to your question that helps the panel. It can also encourage people to come up to you after the session as you are identifiable rather than just another person in the room.

Try to engage with the sessions you attend. Keep comments and questions positive.

Ask for copies of presentations if not provided.

Challenge your learning style – e.g. don't take notes, listen.

Try not to be too ambitious in your expectations for each session. Just one idea and it was worth it!

Even a session that was a let-down can provide you with access to people with whom to network. Sometimes the informal conversations can prove more rewarding than the sessions themselves!

Think about establishing your own session 'grading system' so you can remind yourself which were the most useful.

Outside of sessions

Poster areas or displays provide a more active environment in which you may feel more 'in the driving seat' in that you can determine how long to stop off at each poster. If the poster presenters are there you are given a great opportunity to talk about their work with them and you have a direct line for any questions you might want to ask of them.

Keep notes of key points and actions. Compile a 'to do' list as the conference progresses.

Find out what people do - their roles and responsibilities in their institutions etc.

Write notes on the back of the business cards you obtain from people to remind you what you discussed with them, what you learned about them, what you'd like to follow up with them later, how you might work together etc. Don't do this in front of them - wait until you are somewhere else!

Send emails to colleagues at the end of the days to feed back ideas and plans. This enables colleagues to get you to gather more information if needed.

Don't spend all your time with the colleagues you went with. It is intimidating to other delegates to talk to a group of people that know each other well so you will have fewer people make

overtures. Get outside your comfort zone occasionally. You could decide to meet to go to dinner together but agree that each of you will bring along someone you met at the conference.

You may find out at coffee break that others are facing similar problems or have similar questions (Where do we put the posters up?) You may be able to be useful/helpful in resolving these problems.

Tips on getting away – end conversations politely – “I just want to catch so and so before s/he goes.”

Don't underestimate the importance of socialising with a purpose at the evening events. Try to sit next to people you want to meet. Maybe move places between courses.

If there is no dinner organised, try to ask people you meet and like what their plans are. If they don't have any, take the initiative and make some; e.g. suggest meeting in the hotel foyer at a particular time then go to a local restaurant.

Invite others to socialise – to the pub, to dinner, or meet over breakfast. Don't avoid the conference dinner. Sit with the right people.

Don't get a hangover – you need stamina. Pace yourself. At evening 'do's' be aware of the time of the first session in the morning which you plan to attend, and how important that session is to you. Balance the fun you are having with the importance of the early session topic!

Don't feel you have to go to everything. Be selective. Pace yourself. Build in 'down time'. You will be exhausted.

Offer to do a conference blog or check if there is one.

After the event

Write up reflections on the train/plane going home. Did you accomplish your goals? If not, why not? What would you do differently next time? Reflect on key messages, don't just file notes away. List your action points on the journey home.

Arrange a de-briefing get together with colleagues from your own institution who went to the same conference.

Arrange a meeting with interested parties in the Faculty/School/Department when you get back to share findings and discuss what things you can take forward.

Share with others to write a short report afterwards.

Really DO send that follow-up email to key people you met – “Really enjoyed your talk”; “I promised to send you this article.” - saying something about what you got out of their presentation or the conversation you had with them.

Contact anyone whose presentation you missed and request materials if they are not available via the conference proceedings/web site.

Most conferences give you a list of delegates with contact details. After the event it can be useful to look through the list and identify people in your area/country who also attended and get in touch by e-mail or phone, saying 'I was at the conference and noticed you were, too -- what did you think of it?' This can facilitate networking.

Always take the opportunity to complete a feedback form – and/or email feedback to organisers after the event (including the positives!).

If you are terrible at remembering names, create a ‘conference 2009’ file and put everything in there so you can always find the name of that person you were chatting to.

Keep a message folder in your Outlook email for conference-related correspondence.

Try to incorporate at least one thing from the conference into your work.

In your team/unit/School, encourage the development of a repository for people to share information from conferences – who goes where/subject areas/themes.

You don't have to write a thesis about your conference experience. A 2/3 page summary with URLs and useful links/contacts will suffice.

You may have the opportunity to report back to a working group or committee explaining the value of the event to you, what you gained from the experience and how it will help the institution. This can pave the way for future conference attendance. Writing such a report can help organize what you learned in your own mind. Save a copy for your portfolio/personal file.

Think about how ideas can be used in your discipline and perhaps as a route to funding opportunities.

Conferences overseas

Can you make the most of a conference abroad and book some holiday too?

Pack essentials in hand-luggage (Many experiences of only getting their luggage in time to bring it home!).

If you have collected lots of heavy paper and booklets, mail them home. Take a self-addressed empty jiffy bag with you for this purpose. Don't carry them – lots of flights now have really tight luggage weight limits.

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