

“ASK THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR” about ... PRESENTING AT CONFERENCES

Pātai: (Question)

I've recently started my PhD and my supervisor has recommended I think about presenting at an international conference in my second or third year. Although this sounds exciting I'm a bit nervous about it. I'm also wondering what kinds of funding are available and how I can find information about the best conferences in my field.

Jenny Hobson, Susan Carter and Frances Kelly reply:

Your supervisor is right to encourage you to present at an international conference and there are many excellent reasons for doing so. It is also sensible to feel a bit nervous; after all, conferences are expensive, and not only in terms of the time required putting together a presentation that will really advance your work, but also in terms of money.

Although exciting to attend, you will have to weigh up the benefits with other factors such as cost and prioritising the best potential publication vehicles for your work. In this issue Williams (2009, p.2) points out that perhaps energy may be better spent writing for an academic journal. However, he also emphasises that conferences are an important part of the scholarly endeavour.

Why present a conference paper?

To expand on the benefits of presenting a conference paper:

First, it is a great opportunity to engage in academic dialogue. You not only share, discuss and disseminate the latest information and research, but truly become part of the research community. The benefits of developing and maintaining connections with other colleagues, researchers and established academics in your field should not be underestimated and may also lead to opportunities for future collaboration. You may even discover a particular work, body of work, or researcher you did not know about.

Second, you also have the opportunity to show that your work is of an international standard (which is one of the key criteria for doctoral-level research), attain recognition in your field, and sharpen your work through exposure to international scrutiny. Facing challenging questions or remarks is good practice and experience (for the oral examination, for instance) and receiving feedback from your peers can help you to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your work which you can then expand or develop upon.

Finally, your horizons may be expanded in other ways. You may get to see parts of the world you have never been to, see how another university or institution operates, or meet people from other cultures and walks of life.

Once you've established that presenting at a conference is right for you, it will be important to choose the best conference. Finding precisely the right conference, as well as information about funding can take time, so be prepared to put energy aside for further investigation.

Finding conferences in your field

To find conferences and conference proceedings in your field there are numerous library databases, websites and library catalogues you can search. The following University of Auckland website lists a number of directories that will alert you to upcoming conferences in your field as well as where to look for conference papers and proceedings:

<http://www.library.auckland.ac.nz/instruct/conferences.htm>

Your library or institute may subscribe to the 'PapersInvited' database which lists 'Calls for Papers' issued by professional bodies, journal editors and other conference organizers in all disciplines. Using your institutional email address you can quickly create an account and select the areas of specialisation you wish to receive regular email notifications about as new conferences are added to the database. Options like 'MyCalendar' and 'MyPlanner' allow you to view abstract submission dates and other important deadlines for conferences in your chosen areas.

A number of directories are also freely available on the Internet and are searchable by keyword and by subject area. For example:

- [All Conferences](#) – a directory of conferences, conventions, trade shows, exhibits, workshops, events and business meetings.
- [Conference Alerts](#) – for academic conferences worldwide. You can also set up free email updates
- [H-Net Online](#) – for humanities and social sciences.

Finding conference papers and proceedings

Conference proceedings are the collections of individual published papers, or abstracts of papers, presented at a conference (also called congresses, symposia, seminars, colloquia, workshops). They are useful because they provide quick access to the most recent research, can include other sources of information, and provide good examples of best practice.

However, they can be time consuming to find because they are published in a variety of ways. Proceedings for instance, may be published as monographs, or serials. Some proceedings aren't published for two years (if at all). Individual papers on the other hand may be published on an author or institutional website, or in a particular journal.

Individual papers published in journals can be found by searching library databases, while conference proceedings can be found by searching library catalogues. Sometimes libraries will have a hardcopy of the proceedings, or if not, they will obtain a copy via the inter-library loans system.

From an individual conference paper you can identify the conference title and use it for further searching in a database, library catalogue or on the Internet. Or, use keywords to search for a topic e.g. genetics and proceedings (also try keywords like **conference**, **symposium** as well as the **year** or conference **location**).

Finding funding

Many universities, or departments within universities, have special funds available to assist postgraduate students to attend and present at conferences, or to assist with travel costs for research. The University of Auckland for instance, has the Postgraduate Research Student Studies (PReSS) accounts for doctoral students. With the supervisor's approval, these can be used for conference funding. At Auckland, these accounts may also be accumulated from one year to the next, which places an international conference more within reach. Your institution is very likely to have similar support programmes.

As well as university funding, external sources of funding may also be available. Be sure to ask your supervisor or postgraduate advisor for more information about what funding is available: be pro-active in finding financial support for fares, accommodation and related expenses.

Reference

Williams, L.R.T. (2009). Ask the professor about ... Publishing in conference proceedings and journals. *MAI Review*, 1, Career Workshop 2, 2 pages.

Author Notes

This article has adapted material from the *Conferences* workbook developed for a workshop run by Jenny, Susan and Frances as part of the Doctoral Skills Programme at the University of Auckland.

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