Getting the Most out of Conferences

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November 20, 2018

Introduction

Going to conferences is an important part of our job. If you've just gotten the first results in an exciting project or whether you already have a more polished working paper, you want to get it out into the world. More importantly, you want to get yourself out there! People need not just be aware of your work, they also need to know you and your name. That's what conferences are for. Feedback, but also to build a reputation as a scholar and a network - neither of which is something you will have at the beginning of your Ph.D. And both will be needed by the end of it (job market).

Getting started can be daunting and therefore I wanted to share a few of my own experiences. These are mere tips that I would have liked to know four years ago but you should decide independently as to what you think is useful. It is my hope that there are one or two things in here that might be useful to you and other readers. It should also be mentioned that the majority of examples are labor or economic history because those are the types of conferences and workshops that I attend. The advice I try to offer, however, is mostly generic and not dependent on the examples.

The handout starts by describing how you can find conferences and workshops that suit your requirements and experience. The remainder then covers the before-during-after steps of the whole process. This handout is evolving on a rolling basis, so I appreciate feedback of any kind. If you have further questions or comments, please feel free to drop me an email: a.ferrara@warwick.ac.uk

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1. Which Conference Should You go to?

First thing to know about conferences is which ones you should go to. How do you find this out or how do you find conferences at all? If you Google search for *economics conference*, you will get swamped by a complete information overflow. And most of it is not going to be very helpful. So how do you know what conferences to go to?

- Ask your supervisor. She/he is likely in your field and knows what conferences will be suitable for a) you and b) for the stage of your research. For some conferences/workshops it is better if you attend when you are already closer to the job market. This is particularly true for events such as any of the NBER meetings, or major conferences in your field such as SOLE for labor.[1] Other events, such as summer schools, are more suited for the first or second year of your Ph.D. Your supervisor will give you some good starting points on this. Asking Warwick Ph.D. candidates who are at an advanced stage is also a good idea!

- Check out the CVs of more senior Ph.D. students at good departments, including Warwick. They will have attended quite a few conferences by then, so free-ride on their efforts.

- Team up with a bunch of other Ph.D. students in your or related fields and collect conferences in an online spreadsheet. Ten eyes see more than two! Set it up such that everyone can enter the name of the conference, date of the event, place/country of the event, and the **deadline for applications**. Do NOT miss these as they are binding in almost all cases.

- Twitter is a pretty good source, conditional on you following the right people. Take advantage of 'scientific twitter' but don't rely on it. Conference info there comes at an arbitrary rate and it depends on i) someone tweeting about the event and ii) you seeing the tweet. This does not imply that you should spend a substantial amount of twitter. Again, if you see something useful either for you or for one of your colleagues, tell them. This will give them an incentive to share such information with you too.

Once you have found some information about these kinds of events, you will notice that there are different types of conferences and workshops out there. Each of these has their advantages and drawbacks. If I had to classify conferences/workshops into groups, this would be my list:

- Large-scale conferences: general interest (EEA, RES) or field-specific (SOLE, EHA)

[1] Of course you can go earlier but you can only present the same paper once. Hence presenting the job market paper too soon means that you cannot showcase it again in the pre-market year.

- topic-specific workshops (2nd IZA Workshop on Gender and Family)
- Ph.D. student workshops (IZA Summer School, ASREC Grad Student Workshop)
- Ph.D. conferences (Warwick Ph.D. Conference)
- invite-only workshops (requires a network, so mostly not for Ph.D. students)

The difference between a *Ph.D. conference* and a *Ph.D. workshop* (or summer school) is that workshops typically involve lectures by faculty, and sometimes you are not even presenting your own work.

Most conferences happen between March and October when teaching is finished at the majority of universities. Should you go to a large conference or a small workshop? As always, it depends. Certainly there is a lot to this question but let me try to summarize some pros/cons for large-scale conferences and smaller specialized workshop.

Pros and Cons of Large Conferences

- They can be good for a start because they are usually easier to get in to.
- They can be pretty expensive but this depends (the EEA takes 335 EUR from Ph.D. students whereas the RES takes 10 GBP).
- You get to see more diverse papers and they expose your own work to a broader audience and not just to people who are familiar with your field.
- That, however, assumes that somebody comes to your session. With 500 people at a conference divided into twenty parallel sessions, you might be left with a very meagerly sized audience. There is a lot of randomness as to how many people are in your session or how actively they ask questions.
- Usually there is no discussant. This is not great because it helps a lot if at least one person has actually read your work and can provide informed comments.
- Presentations tend to be pretty short. The typical length is around 20 minutes.
- Mechanically there is more potential to meet new people. In practice, other researchers tend to stick with their long-time friends and for an outsider it can then become tough to get into those circles.

Pros and Cons of Smaller Workshops

- They are more likely to provide participants with partial/full travel and/or accommodation subsidies given that fewer people attend. This makes these workshops much more competitive to get in. But if you make it, it will look good on your CV.

- Some will require a reference letter from your supervisor. Don't leave this to the day before the application deadline, ask them earlier.
- Presentations are normally longer. 30+ minutes are typical. You are also more likely to have a discussant.
- Even if you don't have a discussant, your audience will be experts in your field or a closely related topic (if not, you likely went to the wrong workshop). Hence they tend to listen more carefully and give more comments than a general audience. Said experts are also likely to be your future editors or referees. Generally: whatever kind of presentation you give, always try to do your best and be excited about it. You never know who listens.
- Fewer participants allow for more and closer interaction, i.e. better feedback and higher chances of making new friends.

It might seem from this comparison that small workshops are always preferable. While personally I would agree with this assessment, the downside of specialized workshops is the clubbishness associated with them. Though this depends hugely on your field and the workshop in question. In general, it is harder to get into a workshop/mini-conference and some of them are by invitation-only.

How many conferences should you go to? **As many as you can!** Seriously. Presenting your work and yourself to others is the bread and butter of this job. Conferences are where,

- people get to know you and your work and where you get feedback and comments
- you build your professional network and your reputation
- you will meet potential co-authors, hiring committee members, referees, and editors
- you meet people who may even invite you to their department to give a talk or to their invite-only session at another conference
- you can make some friends (it's not only always about work, try to enjoy the experience because you will be surrounded by new, smart and often highly interesting people).

You don't get any of this by sitting in your office alone.

2. Before Going to the Conference

You have applied to your most desired conference(s) and they accepted your paper. Congratulations! If not, don't get discouraged. It happens and, like with a lot of other things, there is a good amount of randomness in these acceptance decisions. You might have gotten someone from the scientific committee who just had a bad day. They are also just human. But suppose you've been accepted. What is there to do?

- Go through the list of conference participants. Is there someone you should really try and talk to? If so, it's perfectly fine to shoot them an email and very politely ask for whether they could offer you ten minutes of their time because you work on similar topics and would like to hear their expert opinion.
- Having a well maintained website is a good idea. If you are in the pre-job market year, then this is a definite must-have. People will look you up on Google and twitter.

You will normally be in a session with two or three other papers. It might seem time intensive but I would encourage you to read the other papers in your session and to write the other participants a friendly email with your comments. People really appreciate this! Especially if there is no discussant. Why would you do something like this?

- You build a reputation of being a good colleague. This is worth a lot! Others will remember you for this.
- People who received comments from you are more likely to comment on your work.
- You might learn something new. We economists read too little anyway!
- Acquiring the skill of critically/purposefully reading academic papers at an early stage is a good idea. Later when you have to write referee reports, this will come in handy. Try to learn good writing practices and adopt those in your own work. A lot of writing well isn't learned by writing but by (attentive) reading.

Related to this, do you see James Fenske in seminars (if you are at Warwick)? He writes up comments in real-time. This strategy makes him pay attention during the talk from start to finish, so he gets more out of it. He trains his mind to listen critically and to spot flaws or room for improvement immediately. And people remember him as good colleague and as a smart guy. Whether you send comments before or after, it's something to emulate!

3. During the Conference

- Go to all sessions/as many sessions as you can. Sightseeing is best left for after the conference.

- Try to be an active participant in the sessions. If you have additional points or comments, people appreciate it if you walk up to them after their talk. Everyone is happy if others show interest in their work and often this is a good conversation starter. Especially if there is more time left, they will eventually ask you about your work too.

- Even if a paper is not in your field or research interest, try to be an active listener. Was there a technique, method or referenced paper that might be useful for your own work? What were the weaknesses in the approach you saw, and how would you have done it better? How was the presentation style, structure of the talk? Listen for these things and you will get something out of every talk!

- Your own attitude determines a lot. If you are nice, attentive, constructive and clever, people will reciprocate. This is particularly true for smaller events. You will occasional see individuals who believe that destroying others' identification strategy in the rudest possible way is a signal of smartness... it's really not.

- If you go to conferences with colleagues from Warwick, try to not only hang out with them. Having good relations with people in the department is important but you see them on a daily basis. Go and meet **new** people and make some friends. This doesn't mean you have to be Mr./Mrs. Network. Be yourself, have fun. You can also chat about non-academic topics (up to a certain extend, remember that this is a professional meeting) and then the rest will follow.

- Go to the conference dinner. Yes, they are overpriced and yes, you are probably tired and jetlagged. Usually the food is good and it's also more fun than what it may look like at the beginning.

- Having mentioned conference dinners: do not overdo it with the alcohol. This should be a self-explanatory but especially if you are jetlagged, it will likely affect you more than you think. Having fun is okay but remember that you are still among your peers and that this is a professional event.

- If people give you their business card (happens rarely), don't throw those away. Use them to re-connect later after the conference.

- Stick to the rules. Your session likely has a chair who will chastise you in case you are trying to go overtime. Especially the presenter after you is going to resent you.

It's an easy way to leave a bad impression. Don't do it. Practice your talk, stick to your allocated time.

- Take good notes of your audience's comments. It looks terrible if a speaker ignores points made by the audience in this way because you came to the conference to get feedback as well. Don't waste this opportunity.

If you have to discuss someone's paper, see here:
`https://chrisblattman.com/2010/02/22/the-discussants-art/`

4. After the Conference

- Re-connect with those who you have met during the conference by dropping them a quick email. "Dear X, it was a pleasure to meet you at the Y workshop last week...". This is for those who you created a link with, i.e. researchers who had a good chat with you that went beyond a mere few sentences. It's a nice thing to do and you again build your reputation as a pleasant individual.

- If someone has given you comments or feedback on your paper, thank them for it. They took the time to think about your work. Reward this with a nice thank you note. "I appreciated your comment on the X problem. I will try to think hard to overcome this!". In their response, they will potentially even provide possible solutions to your X problem because you took the time to write them and that's nice, so they are likely to be nice back to you.

- Get reimbursed. **Keep all receipts** including Uber bills, etc. You might need those. This is seemingly obvious but sometimes people forget that these things also have a time-stamp on them. Don't miss the deadline. A good time to do this is on the way back from the conference, for instance.

- Review the notes you took on the comments/questions you received. Write them up in a way such that you can read it at a later time. Most likely the notes you took during the talk are pretty messy. It's a good idea to keep a little book with all those comments because loose sheets of paper will easily get lost. Are there re-occurring questions across different conferences/workshops? If yes, you should address them because these are probable questions that referees will be asking. You don't have to do and implement everything that everybody told you to. Think hard about each comment and keep the useful ones.

I only got a poster invite, should I do it?

Yes. Posters are presentations but in a different format. Don't see it as a bone thrown to the junior economists or as a 2nd class presentation. For instance, the European Association of Labour Economists (EALE) randomizes people into posters and presentations. So there you can see very senior people standing next to a poster. To get the most out of the poster session,

- prepare a good poster even though this is time intensive; use as little text as possible (less words = better), big and powerful graphs, etc. I will not go into the details of how to make a good poster, there are excellent guides on this on the internet but the structure and presentation of the poster matters a lot.

- bring a few copies of the paper for very eager attendees in case you already have a draft.

- or, even better, instead of the full paper write a neat 1-page summary (with the web link to the full paper at the bottom) and offer it to everyone after you walked them through your poster: "So this is what my paper is about. If you like, I'd have a one-page summary with the download link to the full paper here if you are interested. Thanks a lot for your time and your interest, I really appreciate your comments!"

- before the conference, go through the list of participants and see whether there are people who you think should definitely see your poster, e.g. because they work on similar topics, and email them to ask whether they could come and see it: " Dear X, from the participant list of conference Y I saw that you will also be attending. I will present a poster there and since you are an expert in this field, I would be very happy if you found some time to step by and discuss the poster with me."

Even if you don't like posters (a lot of people don't like posters) and you think it's a waste of time, go anyway. Going to conferences is not just about giving presentations. Do your poster thing and then spend some time to meet new people, chat a little, and make some friends.