



OPINIÃO



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What's in a meeting?

As the Honorary Meetings Secretary for the UK Biochemical Society, I am delighted to have been asked to share some of my experiences relating to scientific meetings with Portuguese Biochemists. One of the key aims of the Biochemical Society [www.biochemistry.org] is the communication of Biochemistry internationally, and we would very much like to develop and further extend our collaborative ventures with other Bioscience societies in Europe and elsewhere. The Biochemical Society achieves its aims of promoting the science of biochemistry and the cellular and molecular life sciences in general, through work in **Education** and scientific **Policy**, together with **Publishing** (through Portland Press - a not-for-profit organisation that is owned by the Biochemical Society) and not least, a programme of Scientific **Meetings**. It is my belief that if scientific meetings are to continue to be relevant in the rapidly evolving research environment, they must redefine themselves to offer new formats and opportunities for scientific communication to remain a valuable aspect of our research activities. In this short article, I will describe some of the ways in which the Biochemical Society has begun to try and address these issues, emphasising

the dynamic nature of scientific meetings and welcoming suggestions and input from Portuguese biochemists.

Presentation of our work at scientific conferences represents an important way of communicating our research efforts, and importantly, exchanging ideas with others working on similar topics. In addition, scientific meetings can offer so much more than the programme of presentations that may have tempted us to register in the first place. There are poster sessions, technology-based workshops, careers events, and an interesting social programme with a chance to visit local attractions. There may also be an opportunity to publish an article in a journal that reports the proceedings of the conference, providing an important adjunct to publication of a full article in peer-reviewed journals.

However, as scientists, the many demands upon our precious time make it increasingly important to prioritise how to use it most effectively. We have to undertake or supervise laboratory work, write manuscripts or applications for funding, or alternatively review manuscripts or grant applications by others.

In addition, there may be teaching commitments or departmental meetings or seminars to attend. With all this pressure upon our available time, one of the activities that may be compromised is attending conferences. Going to a scientific meeting can be expensive (especially when travel, accommodation and registration fees are added together) and involves spending time away from both work and family. In addition, as our research becomes ever more specialised and focused, large conferences which have a single session that is directly relevant to our work may be increasingly difficult to justify. It is now possible to watch that keynote lecture you wanted to see from the comfort of your own desk, playing and pausing at your own convenience (for example: <http://videocast.nih.gov/default.asp>). In addition, advances in electronic communication have facilitated interactions in a way that was not possible previously, perhaps undermining the social networking opportunities that scientific meetings used to offer.

The overall aim of the Meetings programme is to allow communication of a variety of biochemistry-related topics that are of high quality and directly relevant to the life science research community as a whole.

This programme has evolved dynamically over time. Less than ten years ago, the Biochemical Society meetings programme consisted of four large meetings held each year at different venues around the UK, usually a host university, with a programme drawn up from proposals for colloquia submitted by "interest groups". These groups were covered quite diverse subject areas: Biochemical Immunology Group, Bioenergetics, Education, Glycobiology, Hormone, Industrial Biochemistry and Biotechnology,



Lipid, Membrane, Molecular & Cell Pharmacology, Molecular Enzymology, Neuroscience, Nucleic Acids & Molecular Biology, Protein & Peptide, Regulation in Metabolism, and Techniques. It is possible that the diverse programmes of science presented at these meetings contributed to the decline in delegate registration.

In 2004, the meetings programme was reshaped to try and meet the changing demands of the scientific community. A single high profile meeting called "BioScience2004 - From Molecules to Organisms" was organised which was attended by over 1200 delegates, with more than 500 poster presentations. In addition, there were sessions for Careers and a "Science in Society" colloquium. This format was repeated again in 2005 and 2006 and in 2007, a unique event titled "LifeSciences2007" was conceived, bringing together three major societies (British Pharmacological Society, Physiological Society and the Biochemical Society) at a single venue for the first time with 60 scientific sessions, all jointly organised by the three societies, including more than 150 oral communications and nearly 600 posters.

But despite impressive speaker lists which might have been predicted to attract potential conference attendees and excellent feedback from delegates that had attended these meetings, there were fewer paying delegates than anticipated. It is possible that this format of meeting, covering a broad spectrum of research topics, might not be the most attractive to researchers with increased pressures on their resources and time.

There are relatively few venues that have the capacity to seat approximately a thousand delegates and the associated costs of holding a large meeting are high. Prof. Brian Beechey (then Meetings Secretary) had the foresight to introduce a new programme of "Focused" meetings that would provide of forum to bring together scientists working on specific topics. It was envisaged that these short meetings, without the restrictions on choice of venue that smaller numbers of delegates allows, they would provide a more cost effective way of delivering a programme of science.

I believe this format of meeting to be one of the best, bringing together like-minded sci-

entists and allowing in-depth presentations of current research that provokes interesting discussions, a feature that is sometimes missing at larger meetings where people tend to present overviews or recently published work.

Currently, the Biochemical Society organises approximately 45 days of scientific colloquia that are delivered through a variety of formats, including residential meetings (Harden Conferences), an Annual Symposium on a specific topic together with 10-15 specialized Focused Meetings. Around 1500 people register for meetings organised by the Biochemical Society annually. Although high delegate numbers are an indicator of success of a meeting, I think it is important that there are meetings organised on topics that represent emerging areas of research that may attract fewer delegates. In addition, the Biochemical Society offers support to other meetings that are organised without the direct involvement of society staff (Independent Meetings). The scientific content covered at Biochemical Society meetings (excluding the Harden conferences) is reported in the journal *Biochemical Society Transactions*, which under the Editorship of Prof. David Richardson has seen significant web-based downloads of published manuscripts together with an increase in impact factor.

The Biochemical Society has been keen to collaborate with other learned societies in order to promote communication of science and is actively pursuing additional links. This year sees a series of workshops on techniques for molecular analysis jointly organised with the Royal Society for Chemistry and a joint meeting with the British Society for Cell Biology. Important new ground for the Society was the first Focused meet-



ing held in Europe in collaboration with the Spanish "Inproteolys" network in 2008. Although it is possible that the location of Tenerife helped to make this meeting attractive to delegates, we are keen to promote these sorts of collaborative approaches, particularly in Europe: [www.eesimail.com/society_activities/2030808%20European_HTML/Euro_mkt.html]

Having recently attended a conference in the Algarve and had the opportunity to experience just a few of the delights that Portugal has to offer, I would be interested to see collaborative ventures with Portuguese biochemists developed further!

So how will meetings develop in the future? I firmly believe that maximising opportunities for delegates to exchange ideas and communicate the latest exciting developments requires that we continue to examine new ways of delivering meetings. I am convinced that providing opportunities for Ph.D. students and early career post-doctoral fellows to present their work at a meeting alongside international world-renowned scientists is critical. The inclusion of events such as careers days for PhD students and post-doctoral fellows exploring employment opportunities in industry, publishing or science communication or legislation is also key. One very successful new venture that the Biochemical Society has investigated in terms of meetings format is the "Young Life Scientists" Symposium – a meeting organized entirely by young researchers – for young researchers [www.younglifescientist.org/programme/programme.asp?Meeting=YLS2009Pro].

Another interesting idea is whether the concept of the "unconference" [en.wikipedia.org/



wiki/Unconference] could offer exciting new ways to develop scientific meetings. Examples include SciFoo and ScibarCamp [www.scibarcamp.org]. In these conferences, the topics which are discussed are chosen by the delegates that attend, possibly providing new opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas between people working in different disciplines – something that may be critical as chemists, engineers and biochemists come together to tackle new problems. For example in the development of imaging technologies to follow physiological processes in real-time or in the development of novel therapeutics. In addition, it may provide a forum that would help counter the establishment of scientific dogma and open up new ways of thinking. It is also important to consider the opportunities that Web 2.0 offers in terms of meetings opportunities (see this link: [www.ctwatch.org/quarterly/articles/2007/08/web-20-in-science]). It is already possible to watch lectures from the comfort of your desk, although these presentations can be a little dry as they lack real-time interaction with the audience. In this context, Nature Publishing has developed the Elucian Islands – a way of conferencing in a virtual environment. Delegates participate at a conference using a computer-based interface (in Nature's case

using SecondLife) allowing them to attend lectures and meet with other delegates in a virtual setting. This concept will undoubtedly develop further and will provide a mechanism for communicating science to a wider audience (also see this link: [network.nature.com/people/mfenner/blog/2008/09/12/its-time-for-conference-2-0])

Not that I see virtual conferences replacing the need that we have for face-to-face meetings to communicate science, but they offer new opportunities that may contribute to our enjoyment of science – promoting interactions and exchanges of ideas. I look forward to my first virtual drink in the bar at such a meeting with an open mind! ☺

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