

The impact of academic conferences and how to make them useful

DONALD NICOLSON¹

¹BA (Hons), MSc, PhD Health Services Research

Pervenuto il 5 ottobre 2016. Accettato il 24 ottobre 2016.

Summary. Academic conferences have to date largely evaded empirical examination, despite demanding a lot of time and effort from those attending. Based on my work for a forthcoming book, I consider examples of conferences, including the Cochrane Colloquium, that provide important lessons from which we can learn about the impact of conferences. Travel to the conference, the venue, and when it is held can be a barrier to delegates attending, impacting on what will be said and discussed. By sharing new knowledge and wisdom, conferences act as a signal that cuts through the noise and adds to the "Knowledge Enterprise". But if the delegates are too tired from travel or do not attend, it is not possible to meaningfully discuss issues. There is a need for the evolving discipline of Meta-research to examine research conferences, and for academics to discuss and challenge the role and value, and usefulness of academic conferences.

Academic conferences have to date largely evaded the empirical gaze, despite attending and presenting at conferences being something nearly all academics do. They are expected to expend great time and effort justifying attendance, applying and looking for funding to travel, let alone devising their presentations. But there is no hard evidence to say that attending a conference is worth the effort. When I started writing about conferences, my suspicion was that conferences merely generated noise. My reason for thinking this was that I had as a former academic attended over 20 conferences, sat in on hundreds of presentations and debates, presented over 20 times myself, heard countless people ask "questions", and a similar number of replies. My hope was that at least some conferences had gone beyond mere noise, and were useful to the audience/stakeholders/the wider environment by having an impact. It is now my opinion that in the world of health services research, and particularly through the Cochrane Collaboration, there are important lessons from which we can learn about the impact of conferences.

Conferences value might rest in them being able to highlight new trends and directions for research, framing the issues and alternatives for discussion, and holding sway over the key people at the centre of the field¹. Conferences are in a good position to

Impatto dei congressi medici e come renderli utili.

Riassunto. I congressi medici hanno finora in gran parte eluso l'esame empirico, nonostante il dispendio di tempo e l'impegno di quanti vi prendono parte. In questo articolo vengono presi in esame alcuni esempi di conferenze, quali il Cochrane Colloquium, dalle quali trarre importanti insegnamenti circa il loro impatto. Il viaggio, il luogo e la data dove si svolgono tali congressi possono costituire un impedimento alla partecipazione dei congressisti, con ripercussioni su quanto verrà presentato e discusso. Attraverso la condivisione delle nuove conoscenze, i congressi agiscono come un segnale che riduce il rumore di fondo contribuendo all'"Impresa della Conoscenza". Tuttavia, se i congressisti saranno troppo affaticati dal viaggio o non potranno partecipare, la discussione delle varie tematiche si rivelerà poco significativa. Se da un lato, per la nuova disciplina della Meta-research, in continua evoluzione, vi è la necessità di sottoporre a valutazione i congressi, dall'altro per la medicina accademica vi è la necessità di discutere la funzione, il valore e l'utilità dei congressi.

have such impact by presenting an infrastructure to meet, disseminate and discuss. But it is important to recognise that "value" need not imply a cost-benefit analysis, especially when the value is personal. Improving our understanding of conferences might help improve matters and I have some examples which can highlight where they have gone beyond mere noise alone.

In October 2003, the 11th Annual Cochrane Colloquium in Barcelona debated conflicts of interests within the Cochrane Collaboration and how the Collaboration should respond to them. Some debates at conferences are theoretical, discussing a concept at an abstract level. The conflicts debate was the antithesis, having potentially serious ramifications for the Collaboration, for example, surrounding the funding of Cochrane review groups. This was no mere exercise in noise generation. Because it started a process within the Collaboration that led to the end of industry funding, there is good reason to consider that the conference was useful.

Held in June 2011 in Durban, the 29th Triennial Congress of the International Confederation of Midwives made a push to make global maternity care a worldwide issue. The conference enabled the Government to recognise the importance of maternity care and in particular that it was vital to tackle health in-

“To share new knowledge and wisdom, acting as a signal that cuts through the noise and adds to the “Knowledge Enterprise”.”

equalities. Because politicians spoke at the event, this raised the issue to the political agenda and attracted media attention, enabling the possibility for change.

Travels, venue, and date

There are probably many examples where conferences have not been helpful in some way. A common problem is travel. Because it appears international conferences are more often held in Europe and the United States, the time and distance spent travelling to conferences in the northern hemisphere is a particular barrier for academics from the likes of New Zealand and Australia attending, as they were away from their offices for longer than their northern peers. If we use the example of the Cochrane Colloquium again, we can see that of the 24 colloquia that have been held to date, more than three quarters took place in the northern hemisphere, with 11 in Europe and five in North America. Five were held in the southern hemisphere. The conference was held five times in Asia, once in South Africa and once in South America. Before 2009 the Colloquium had only been held twice in Asia, once in Africa and once in South America. At that point the vast majority of events were held in the northern hemisphere, including nine in Europe. Between 2009 and 2016 it was held four times in Asia, most recently at the 2016 colloquium in South Korea. The Colloquium may or may not reflect most international conference, but I think it is a useful example because it indicates how difficult it is to find a suitable meeting venue for an international organisation whose members are spread worldwide.

The venue and date of the conference is but one of a range of problems that they face, and it highlights a need to make conferences more user friendly, and useful to those attending. Conferences that are held at the weekend or at the beginning or end of the week can present problems for academics who have families, therefore they might be best as weekday events. If people require a day's travel on either side of the conference, it is better to run them from Tuesday to Thursday so that Monday and Friday can be for transit, and attendees do not lose their weekend. People in the southern hemisphere endure lengthy travel to attend conferences in Europe and the USA. Conferences might seek to run biannually in separate hemispheres. This is not merely a point of courtesy. Who does and does not attend a conference will impact on what can be said and discussed.

It is also important to consider the welfare of delegates. Travelling to a conference can be arduous, especially if it is far away and involves overseas travel. Because of the effects of travel, those attending should be encouraged to have time to spare before the conference starts, if need be, to acclimatise to the new environment, and climate and/or to get over travel. If we want to think

with our cynical cost effective hat on, we might see that delegates worn out by traveling afar might not be able to contribute as effectively as they otherwise might. At the end of the day, there might be an expectation that conferences will be a place to share new knowledge and wisdom, acting as a signal that cuts through the noise and adds to the “Knowledge Enterprise”. But this can be problematic if the delegates are too tired from travel to meaningfully discuss issues. In addition, conferences can maintain professional barriers and obstruct useful inter-disciplinary discussion. It might then be useful for different disciplines to amalgamate for an event; for example, bringing together a statistical and humanities audience at the same conference. Such an endeavour might offer a much needed dialectic.

Conclusion

The usefulness of a conference need not rest on a paradigm-defining plinth. Being at a conference can present the individual a variety of opportunities, including networking, meeting overseas colleagues in person, or acting as a jobs fair. This indicates a personal impact, for example how a particular conference helped their career development, or inspired their work. In the world of Health Services Research, where questions of effectiveness and impact abide, the personal and the person can easily be overlooked when examining impact. The notion of conferences having an impact can be seen to reflect neoliberal thinking where everything has a cost and a value.

There is a place in the evolving research discipline of Meta-research, which aims to evaluate and improve research practices², for studying the research conference. But it remains to be seen if this will be taken up. It might also be helpful for academics to discuss these and other issues in relation to conferences. This article and my forthcoming book³ can offer a vignette for people in Health Services Research to discuss and challenge the role and value, and usefulness of academic conferences.

Conflict of interests: the author declares no conflict of interests.

References

1. Parker M, Weik E. Free spirits? The academic on the aeroplane. *Management Learning* 2014; 45: 167-81.
2. Ioannidis JP, Fanelli D, Dunne DD, Goodman SN. Meta-research: evaluation and improvement of research methods and practices. *PLoS Biol* 2015; 3: e1002264.
3. Nicolson D. Academic Conferences as neoliberal commodities. London: Palgrave Macmillan [in press].

Correspondence to:
Donald John Nicolson
E-mail: donaldjohnnicolson@hotmail.com