

Navigating conferences as a postgraduate researcher

Research

Preparing for, and attending a conference - especially a large one like the RGS summer conference - can be really daunting. Conferences are often very busy, with lots of different sessions going on at the same time, and so it's easy to feel overwhelmed. There are, however, lots of really brilliant things about attending conferences – it can be a great way to hear about fascinating research taking place, meet really interesting people doing similar work, and potentially make important and valuable connections with others.

Below are some tips on how to make the most out of conferences before, during and after the actual event. If you are looking for information on how to present at conferences, the RGS Postgraduate forum has some really great blogs on [writing conference abstracts](#), [designing a conference poster](#) and [preparing a paper presentation](#).

Before the conference

Get to know the programme – It can be a good idea to spend some time in advance reading the programme and working out which sessions you want to go to, as trying to do all of that the first morning can be a rush.



Research the speakers – Conferences are a fantastic way of gaining a deeper insight into the work of academics that you may already be familiar with, or finding out about research of which you have been previously unaware. It is really good practice to find out a little about the speakers for the sessions that you are attending, and do a quick bit of research about them beforehand so that you can be better-placed to take in their presentation and ask questions.



Preparing to network – Conference programmes often run to quite a tight schedule, so it can be a good idea to email, or send a message on X? Blue Sky to the person you want to connect with before the conference. You could ask to chat during one of the coffee breaks, or over lunch (even during a virtual conference!), and that way you make sure you have dedicated time to connect or ask any questions you have.



During the conference

How do I know which sessions to go to? - Conferences often have a programme full to the brim with sessions, often running parallel to one another, so navigating which ones to go to can sometimes be a challenge! One of the easiest ways is to follow the sessions arranged by a particular research group that you might be interested in, as the sessions are often designed to follow on from one another. Don't be afraid to mix and match sessions, though – go with whichever sessions catch your interest, and sometimes sessions that are slightly outside of your immediate research area, or only contain a certain element of it, can help to challenge your perspective and bring new ideas and networks.



Taking a break - Don't forget that it is also completely fine to have a break in place of a session too. Conferences will often span over several days, and during that time your head will probably be spinning with a whole host of ideas in your head! Sometimes conference venues will provide a 'quiet' space in which to rest or do some work. The conference APP or online schedule often marks quiet zones or wellbeing spaces. If not, don't be afraid to leave for a little while to sit in a café or spend some time in a nearby park. If attending a virtual conference, perhaps plan in a walk or tea break at some point in the day.



Have a dedicated 'conference notebook' or document - This is where you can keep your scribbles on sessions and note down any ideas that you have. A few small 'housekeeping' tips can help with this, such as naming and dating the sessions that you attend, and adding keywords that you can help to identify the sessions. If you prefer digital notes, consider using a tool like Notion, OneNote, or a running Google Doc that you can update on the go.



Ask a question, or comment on the session - At the end of each session, there is usually an opportunity for the audience to engage with the speakers and ask questions or offer their own thoughts on an aspect of the session. There will be usually be someone chairing the session, so they will help to facilitate this. Some sessions now also allow participants to post questions anonymously via platforms like Zoom and the Q&A function on the RGS online conference platform — check if this is available. If you don't want to ask a question in front of everyone, don't be afraid to approach the speaker at another point during the conference – such as over a coffee, or send them an email.



After the conference

You may have taken pages of notes, perhaps including ‘to-do’ lists following the conference. As well-intentioned as these may be, it can be challenging to know what to do with all of these ideas, and consequently, they can easily be left forgotten in the back of a well-loved notebook. Here are a few of our top tips to help you to make the most of these post-conference:

If you can, try to schedule in a particular day (or even week) to go through your notes after the conference - It might be that you want to condense your notes and draw out the key ideas, or maybe start reading some papers that were mentioned during the sessions. You could also consider writing a short blog post, social media thread, or a reflection for your research group — this can help consolidate your thoughts and share insights with others.



Follow up with people that you met at the conference – whether this be academics or practitioners leading the sessions, or fellow attendees. Conferences are a fantastic opportunity to begin networking with people, and making the effort to build upon these connections can be very rewarding. If you don’t feel up to approaching someone directly or via email, even doing something like following them on X/Blue Sky is a great way to stay in touch with what they are up to in the field. Connecting on LinkedIn can also be a helpful way to maintain professional links and stay updated on future publications or events.



We hope that you found this helpful! If there is anything else that you would like to know about Research Groups, or any other tips relating to PGR life, we would love to hear from you. You can find us on our [website](#) or LinkedIn.

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