

# TELECONFERENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE



The financial and environmental costs of international travel are traditionally thought of as the greatest obstacles to traditional student mobility, and recently we have witnessed that pandemic outbreaks can present yet another barrier to in-person contact. With the International Conference of Undergraduate research, Bachelor's students at universities on opposite sides of the globe are embracing virtual mobility as a vehicle for sharing their research far and wide without ever booking a flight.

Traditionally, undergraduate research conferences bring together students from a range of universities in one location to share their knowledge with their peers. Such conferences play an important developmental role for students, providing a space for them to receive feedback and recognition, make connections with research-active peers and see how their own work interacts with a broader research conversation. The events are most commonly held on a local or national level (with exceptions such as the recently-developed World Congress on Undergraduate Research), as the cost of international travel can be prohibitive.

However, the evolution of digital communication technologies has opened up new opportunities to internationalise the undergraduate experience without the significant environmental footprint or financial barriers of international travel. The International Conference of Undergraduate Research (ICUR), established in 2013, is an initiative developed by staff at the University of Warwick in the UK and Monash University in Australia (supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance). It provides students with the opportunity to present their research to an international audience through the use of videoconferencing technology.

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## FINDING CONNECTIONS

From the outset, students from institutions participating in the ICUR are asked to engage with organisers and resources through digital communication technologies. The website introduces students to the ICUR and helps them to understand what presenting at the conference will involve. Videos of previous conferences, statements from student presenters and example materials all show how digital and international interactions may differ from a more standard conference experience. The rigorous abstract submission process challenges students to examine their research through a global lens, to draw out implications that will have impact throughout global research communities and to consider how local and subject-specific issues can translate to an international and interdisciplinary audience.

At the conference itself, taking place over the course of 48 hours each September, students experience virtual mobility through live-streamed video-conference sessions, where they hear the ideas of their global peers. Students present their research in sessions that are themed around different global research priorities – such as the environment and sustainability or health and well-being – and links are made to other participating institutions. Presenters and audience members from all locations are encouraged to find the connecting points between research presentations from different disciplines and different local contexts. They interact in extended Q&A sessions, taking questions that may come from very different ‘places’ in terms of both location and outlook. Through this process, students experience mobility

from the original circumstances in which their research projects were devised.

## CHALLENGING LOGISTICS

The ICUR consists of around 80 conference sessions taking place between 10 or more participating institutions over the course of two days. In the six months between the call for abstracts and the conference itself, more than 500 student researchers and hundreds of other student attendees and volunteers interact with the organisational team behind the event. In devising and executing such a complex event, strong international partnerships between students and staff at Monash and Warwick are essential.

Some of the complexities of organising a large international conference remain the same whether it involves physical travel or purely digital interactions.

The academic calendars of institutions across Asia, Australia, Europe, Africa and the Americas vary considerably, necessitating a fixed date for the event at the end of September. This is the only time suitable for all of the institutions involved in the ICUR, when students are available to present their research simultaneously from each campus location.

These local academic calendars still prove to be a challenge when considering which student cohorts will be in term time, which will have recently graduated and which will have completed research in time for abstract submissions or for the conference itself. For some students, exam preparation or vacation will take priority over research or conference preparation. Digital technologies have helped us to tackle these challenges, allowing students to connect even when, for example, they are travelling to locations far from their university campus.

Mobile digital technologies have also provided us with a mechanism to retain students' interest and confidence in presenting during the long gap between acceptance of their abstract and the conference itself. This gap can encompass exam periods, summer vacation, winter break or even graduation for some students, and can contribute to significant attrition in attendance numbers before the event. Mobile videoconferencing has allowed us to bring students together in preparation groups to meet, discuss, devise and practise their presentations together, across disciplines and nationalities, in the eight weeks prior to the conference. Students can join from home, work, university or other remote locations, keeping them on track and building their confidence despite other commitments and calendar clashes.

#### ADAPTING TO DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

A distinctive feature of the ICUR is the collaboration of staff with student directors based in the UK, Singapore and Australia. ICUR student directors work together to deliver the conference at their home institutions. Collectively, student directors are responsible for:

- Developing and implementing an international social media and communications plan to promote the ICUR
- Recruiting a keynote speaker relevant to international, interdisciplinary audiences
- Participating in the rigorous abstract selection and panel scheduling processes
- Coordinating international and local teams of conference volunteers
- Helping to coordinate the conference itself
- Providing strategic input into the future direction of the ICUR from a student perspective

when students are getting to know each other. Student directors learn to overcome these challenges and develop strong team relationships, adapting their communication style to digital and intercultural contexts. The Warwick and Monash staff who organise the event make use of these same digital technologies to coordinate the delivery of the event and all its component programmes, and must navigate the same obstacles and challenges as their student counterparts.

In a world where digital communication competence has come to be expected and great importance is placed on students' gaining intercultural and international experiences and insights, the ICUR points to the future and tackles increasing concerns around the impact of international travel. The logistics involved in developing the ICUR highlight the opportunities and challenges posed by digital internationalisation: aligning academic calendars, technical capabilities and

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Student directors are exposed to the challenges and opportunities of working in an international team where digital communication technologies are the primary method of engagement. There are significant challenges when developing relationships through the means of digital technologies, particularly when students are doing so for the first time. Digital technologies disrupt traditional communication patterns, particularly by limiting body language cues, and can provide fewer opportunities for small talk

time zones; overcoming communication barriers; and helping students to step out of their comfort zone. All of this requires dedication and imagination.

Yet the use of digital communication technologies has created a unique space for student connection, collaboration and engagement, accessible to all. The rewards will quickly become evident if you speak to any ICUR participant.

— KATE ALDRED & EMMA BARKER