

Getting the Most out of Conferences

Andreas Ferrara*

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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 PhD. And both will be needed by the end of your PhD (hint: job market)!

Getting started can be daunting and therefore I wanted to share a few of my own experiences. The usual disclaimer applies: keep the stuff you find useful, throw away the rest. When I started going to conferences, I would have liked to know a few of these things beforehand. Some of it you will know already, some of it you will discard as useless (and you should, if you feel that way), but hopefully one or two things will save you time, nerves, and money.

It should also be mentioned that the majority of examples are labor or economic history because that's the stuff that I attend. The advice I try to offer, however, is generic and is not dependent on the examples. The handout starts by describing how you can find the right conferences and workshops for you. The remainder then goes through 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

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*

*University of Warwick, Department of Economics. This handout has greatly benefited from comments by Sascha O. Becker, Muhammad Haseeb, Roland Rathelot, and Karmini Sharma.

conference, you will be bludgeoned to death by a complete information overflow. And most of it is pretty useless. 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 useful for a) you and b) for the stage of your PhD. For some conferences/workshops it is better if you attend when you are already closer to the job market. You don't want to present half-cooked stuff at a high-profile event like the NBER-BREAD. Other events, such as summer schools, are more suited for the first or second year of your PhD. Your supervisor will give you some good starting points on this. Asking Warwick PhD candidates who are at an advanced stage of their PhD is also a good idea!
- Check out the CVs of more senior PhD students at good departments, including Warwick. They will have attended quite a few conferences by then, so free-ride on their efforts. Know an awesome PhD student in labor who went to the SOLE? You're labor? You should likely go! At some point. Maybe not in your first year - see the previous point about high-profile conferences. Still: start going to conferences as early as possible!
- Team up with a bunch of other PhDs in your field 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 deadlines! Additional exercise: solve the free-rider problem.
- Twitter is a pretty good source, conditional on you following the right people. Lady Gaga is not tweeting about the 7th IRES Graduate Student Workshop, but Jared Rubin does. 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 is no excuse for being on Twitter 24/7!

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)
- topic-specific workshops (2nd IZA Workshop on Gender and Family)
- PhD student workshops (IZA Summer School, ASREC Grad Student Workshop)
- PhD conferences (Warwick PhD Conference)

- invite-only workshops (requires a network, so mostly not for PhD students)

The difference between a *PhD conference* and a *PhD 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 into
- They can be pretty expensive but this depends (the EEA takes 235 EUR from PhD 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 great deal if at least one person has actually read your stuff.
- Presentations tend to be pretty short, mostly around 20 minutes.
- Mechanically there is more potential to meet new people. In practice, other researchers tend to stick with their pals and for an outsider it becomes tough to get into those circles and in case you want to talk to your favorite economist.

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 looks good on the 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 went to the wrong workshop!). Hence they tend to listen more carefully and give more comments than a general audience. Said experts are also more likely to be your editors or referees!!
- 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. This depends hugely on your field though. In general, it is harder to get into a workshop/mini-conference and some of them are also by invitation-only.

How many conferences should you go to? **As many as you can!** I'm not kidding. 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 don't get any of this by sitting in your office!

2. Before Going to the Conference

You have picked the conference(s) of your dreams 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. I know it sucks, but they are also 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?

- 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 Google you!

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 nice(!) email with your comments. People really appreciate this! Especially if there is no discussion. 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 stuff.
- 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!

Related to this, do you see James Fenske in seminars? 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. If you want to go sight-seeing, do it 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: "What are you working on?" That's +1 who know your paper!
- 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 occasionally 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 stuff (but keep this professional) and then the rest will follow.
- Go to the conference dinner. Yes, they are overpriced and yes, you are probably tired, jetlagged etc. 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 booze! This should be a no-brainer but especially if you are jetlagged, this stuff will hit you like a shovel. 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 piss off people. Don't do it. Practice your talk, stick to your allocated time.
- Take good notes of your audience's comments. It makes a very bad impression to ignore points and it generally looks bad to not take notes because it will seem as though you don't give a damn.

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 (rudimentary) link with, i.e. peeps who had a

good chat with your or who had significant overlap in terms of research interests. It's a nice thing to do and you again build your reputation as a nice individual!

- If someone has given you comments or feedback on your paper, thank them for it! They took the time to think about your stuff. Reward this with a nice thank you note. "I appreciated your comment on the bla problem. I will try to think hard to overcome this!". In their response, they will likely provide potential solutions to your bla 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 a no-brainer but sometimes people forget that this stuff also has a time-stamp. 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). Are there re-occurring questions across different conferences/workshops? If yes, you should address those 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 every comment, then keep the useful ones and discard the rest.