Careers

Lessons learned from conducting a virtual conference

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Abstract

This article discusses the highlights and challenges of organising and running an online conference for medical students. Furthermore, using feedback collated and literature review, this article suggests how to improve attendees' experiences, focusing on optimising attention and encouraging participation. Both organising and attending conferences are great ways to build on a student's CV. This article aims to inspire more medical students to organise online conferences and to improve the experience of attendees.

Introduction

In March 2021, we and 5 other students from Bristol, Southampton and Exeter University hosted a virtual acute care conference aimed at medical students. By outlining our experiences, we aim to inspire students to organise conferences, allowing them to enhance their leadership qualities. Furthermore, they can utilise the recommendations we have drawn from our reflections and current literature to improve the conference experience.

Why host a conference?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were deprived of clinical placements and gaining insight into specialties became challenging. Therefore, we conducted this event to increase awareness of career pathways and the day-to-day life of clinicians.

The conference allowed students to present posters, providing a great CV-building opportunity. For example, the first-place poster provided attendees with insight into the trajectory of COVID-19 patients post emergency-department admission. Organising a conference is a good example of leadership and shows dedication to a speciality, making it a desirable outcome during the Physician ST3 application process.

Organising a conference: the highlights and challenges

A comprehensive checklist of the organisation process can be found in **Figure 1**.

The conference had several highlights, which outlined the importance of organising such events and the challenges served as great learning points.
The highlights:
- Building a multi-institutional team
- Variety of speakers
- The feedback

Building a multi-institutional committee allowed us to work with members who had different aptitudes and experiences. This decreased the burden on each member whilst creating greater diversity within the conference committee and speakers. This variety in speakers resulted in interesting Q&A sessions, allowing for engagement and a true insight into the 'life of a clinician', something that is often confined to placements. Both these elements led to a successful conference reflected by positive feedback. Particularly our pre-clinical colleagues, who have spent most of their medical education in lockdown, felt that this conference helped them reaffirm their goals, an insight they may have lost during the pandemic (**Figure 2**).

Figure 1. Comprehensive checklist outlining the process used to organise the conference.

1. Reach out. 6 months prior to the conference - contact other undergraduate medical societies to form a regional committee, create a group chat and plan virtual meetings.

2. Organise your committee. In the first meeting, allocate roles, decide the aim and scope of the conference, provisional date(s) of the conference, and start discussing speakers to contact.

3. Confirm your timings. How many lectures? How long are your lectures? Are you including breakout rooms/workshops? How many days are you running for?

4. Decide on your platform. Although a virtual conference requires less logistics than in-person, decide on your virtual platform (eg Zoom) and you may require an upgraded account to host a large number of attendees.

5. Communicate. Regular committee meetings are a good way of keeping in touch. A shared document can be very useful to keep track of tasks and confirmed speakers and their topics to avoid overlap

6. Email potential speakers. Cast your net wide and email many speakers, particularly those who had spoken to societies previously.

7. Advertise. Advertise early using societies' social media pages, university/faculty wide emails and any other modality you can think of! Create an online form for students to register their interest.

8. Confirm your speakers. We used a shared spreadsheet which speakers could use to assign themselves to a timeslot and note down their title.

"Being a pre-clinical student during the pandemic, we've had no contact time with patients and met very few members of staff, and due to being almost entirely online for the year it's been easy to forget why we decided to start our courses in the first place. I think today helped me to remind myself of all of the reasons I did, and made me fall in love with it all over again. Also, outside of uni I don't know anyone in medicine, so it was amazing to have a chance to speak to clinicians about their career paths and how I can get there one day. I can't thank you all enough for such a brilliant conference!"

Figure 2. Feedback from an attendee about the benefits of the conference. The individual provided consent for use of data.

The challenges:
* Work–life balance
* Rejection
* Trusting technology.

Organising a conference was demanding whilst maintaining our academic responsibilities and hobbies.

We alleviated stress by appointing topic leads to take on positions of responsibility. We allocated jobs effectively, ensuring the speakers were found in time with consistent communication between team members.

This communication helped us bond as we began to trust each other to work independently. Another stressor was that, unfortunately, some potential speakers turned down the offer to speak. Although understandable, this was demoralising, particularly with some clinicians dropping-out closer to the conference. We overcame this by approaching clinicians interested in teaching and pre-existing contacts of confirmed speakers. However, the greatest challenge was adapting to the technology and its interactive features. To address this, we met with colleagues who had previously held online events. While stressful, these challenges helped us become better leaders. The experience will be relevant for us as clinicians, teaching us about team building, adapting to a team and the importance of each member in reaching a goal.

Using our feedback

Collecting feedback is essential. The feedback form contained 13 questions gathering quantitative and qualitative data.
To improve the value of feedback, we believe that forms should focus on written answers, which allow participants to provide more insight. Furthermore, a focus group of volunteers could be useful to gain deeper understanding of areas that require improvement.

Two main issues were highlighted: the length of the conference and a lack of engagement. These will be discussed further below.

How long should a conference last?

One recurring theme in our feedback was that the day was too long, and attendees struggled to concentrate.

A solution to this could be to keep the same number of lectures but shorten them to 15–20-minutes, which would condense the day and allow attendees to maintain concentration.[2,3,4]

Additionally, students could choose which lectures to attend, allowing them to decide on the length of their own day. This may reduce students' attendance but would not affect the conference's overall scope. Furthermore, attendees with a pre-existing interest in a topic are more likely to find it easier to stay focused and engaged.[5] Interestingly, Bradbury found that the critical factor for student attention span is the teacher themselves, emphasising the need for engaging speakers.[2]
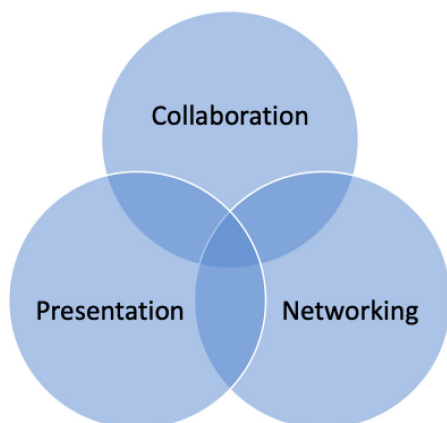
Figure 3. The purpose of interactive workshops in conferences.[6]

How can you optimise engagement online?

Although a virtual setting increased accessibility to our conference, our feedback highlighted that interactivity online did not equate to face-face conversation. To increase engagement, the addition of virtual workshops can be beneficial. The purpose for organising interactive workshops is seen in **Figure 3**.[6] To create a successful workshop, Fulcher *et al.* suggest points to consider, outlined in **Figure 4**.[7]
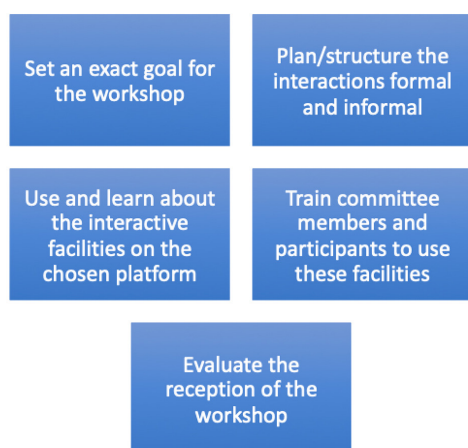
Figure 4. A plan of how to organise virtual interactive activities.[7]
We included elements of interactivity by encouraging students to ask questions during Q&A sessions and present posters. However, the posters should be accessible before the conference, allowing more in-depth discussion.

Evidence shows that participants liked using one whiteboard for everyone to brainstorm together.[6] Alternatively, small groups allow for equal participation and can be assigned randomly or based on interest. Meyer *et al.* tried both and concluded that, although time-consuming, pre-assigned groups were superior to random allocation.[8] In student conferences, attendees could be grouped according to study year or speciality of interest.

Networking is challenging online. Becerra *et al.* restyled the concept of 'speed dating' to 'speed networking'.[6] This could be adapted to our conference as we had a 50-minute lunch break, and students could be matched depending on different universities. Interaction is not obligatory and making it optional would result in productive conversation.

Conclusion

Organising a conference is an enriching experience benefitting both the attendees and organisers, creating a space for learning and interactivity, and a great project to refine leadership skills.

Although the feedback was mostly positive, we found areas for improvement. With a subsequent literature review, we believe that students organising future online conferences can make additions to enhance attendees' experiences. A pre-event questionnaire could be used to ascertain whether the attendees would like shorter talks or the ability to choose the talks they attend and if they would like to take part in networking activities. To improve interactivity, large group brainstorming tasks and pre-assigned small group sessions could take place.

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