

## *Conference 2020 and Beyond - Space Oddity or Space Odyssey?*

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### **Abstract.**

This summary report outlining the processes and decisions involved in 'pivoting' an established annual student research conference in response to sudden campus closure due to COVID-19 pandemic, and a short commentary how this experience may influence conference proceedings in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Early career researchers; Meitheal; Online conference; Pandemic; Postgraduate student research.

## **1. Introduction.**

This report summarises the experience gained and the lessons learned when a student research conference, #edconTCD, was rapidly reformatted from a face to face (f2f) event to an online one. This was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the convivial comfortable space of the city centre university was swapped for a virtual space online, connecting participants from their homes across Ireland and beyond. Within the context of this conference, the evolution of events 'before, during, after' is reported from the perspective of the postgraduate student organisers, and some recommendations are offered.

### **1.1 The conference in context.**

For over a decade a modest peer-organised conference for postgraduate student researchers has taken place each spring on the campus at Trinity College Dublin. Each year a volunteer committee begins planning in November. The 'roll on, roll off' nature of the committee, combining experience and energy, has been an important factor in the evolution of this conference to date. The purpose of the conference has always been to showcase current student research in

education - short paper presentations are the central item on the programme. Recent conferences have seen the introduction of lightning presentations (Gasta), 'campfire' discussions, and increasingly interactive poster presentations. Although planning utilises online shared documents, committee meetings are f2f affairs, with a collegiate and social atmosphere.

## **1.2 Emergency closure of campus: Decision time.**

On March 12th 2020 when the World Health Organisation formally declared a pandemic, the Irish government announced that "*Schools, colleges ... will close from tomorrow*" (Irish Government News Service, 2020).

As this was very close to conference submission date, and there was a sizable cohort of applications to present, the student committee met online with faculty and administration to discuss this development and make a decision on whether to proceed. Key practical factors led to a decision to make the leap and take the conference online:

- faculty and administration offered immediate technical support and immersive involvement, which was accepted in the spirit of meitheal, a cooperative effort undertaken for the benefit of all;
- every applicant whose contribution had been accepted agreed to remain involved;
- the student committee's considerable experience, which engendered both trust in collective capacity and confidence in the values of the conference.

## **2. Conference 2020.**

### **2.1 Before the conference.**

Planning meetings for the team took place in both of the virtual platforms used in the school - Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and Microsoft Teams, while briefing documents and programmes were shared in both Google Drive and OneDrive. The programme timings were rearranged to minimise screen fatigue while maximising exposure of the research students' work (PGRC Conference Proceedings, 2020). Communication with the participants was as honest and open as possible; for many this was the first time they were sharing their research. Group presentations were welcomed, as were pre-recorded submissions. For many involved this was a first online experience - repeated practice sessions were key for organisers, presenters, and

rapporteurs to become more skilled at negotiating unfamiliar spaces and procedures. It was decided to work in tag teams on the day - each virtual space would have both a chair and a 'techie' overseeing it.

## **2.2 During the conference.**

The conference attendance online, at 91 unique attendees, was almost twice the usual f2f number, and most attendees stayed involved for the day. After a warm plenary welcome from both Head of School and Dean of Research, much of the day followed a traditional conference model. Using breakout spaces to run concurrent sessions facilitated tighter timeframes and allowed alternation between larger and smaller groups. Lecture style delivery was alternated with the more chaotic lightning talks; the poster session was turned into a cinematic experience, while the workshops in breakout rooms offered a choice of more focussed interludes. To maintain a sense of identity, each virtual space was named for the actual spaces in the university. There were the inevitable technical glitches. The impact of these was reduced in two ways; firstly, by thorough checks ahead of time to get the organisers used to the digital platform, and secondly, by ensuring the more agile and experienced 'techies' of the organisation team were in place at every session, so those that did occur were dealt with deftly, and with good humour. Time keeping was kept tight. Rapporteurs' sharing of small group activities after each breakout session served to reduce the 'what'd I miss' effect and lent a coherence to the day's events which was reflected in the feedback from the participants.

## **2.3 After the conference.**

A link to an exit survey was offered to participants (organisers, presenters, and attendees) as they left the conference space, asking for one advantage and one deficit of this online space compared to the f2f conference space. 25 responses were submitted.

Advantages and deficits listed were two sides of the same coin - the ease of being at home, saving cost and time was much appreciated (as was the lack of dress code!), but the chance to meet and have conversations with peers was very much missed. Attendees reported appreciation of the atmosphere and the organisation of the day, and the variety in the topics and the approaches. Presenters, the cardinal group, appreciated the platform and the confidence gained, and enjoyed the supportive atmosphere on the day. Organisers expressed relief that the day had played out as planned and without major glitches, and that the meitheal approach

had resulted in delivery of a strong professional day for participants.

### **3. Lessons learned and experience gained.**

#### **3.1 The 'meitheal' effect.**

*"Meitheal is the Irish expression of the ancient and universal appliance of cooperation to social need"* (MaryRobinsonCentre.ie). The 'all in this together' meitheal was a key variable here - the support and guidance from faculty (technical infrastructure and troubleshooting), administration (PR & live tweeting), the Head of School, the university's Dean of Research, who all took pride in 'rowing in' with a venture normally carried out by students in the main. The extra cohort of volunteer personnel emerged as needed. Working online brings with it more complex multimodal layers of management and control, and a need for 'always on' antennas and radar - summarised by one organiser's online comment: "If keeping human traffic at f2f event flowing gracefully in a timely comfortable manner is shepherding, doing the same in online spaces adds air traffic control!" (Amond, 2020).

#### **3.2 Surprises and delights.**

The dynamic nature of the chat spaces was a surprise, as was the degree of immersion achieved - hearing the voices of the presenter, the chairs, the rapporteurs' retelling of the presentations and discussions; watching the visuals of a live curated poster session, and even shouting a countdown along with the ringmaster of the lightning talks.

#### **3.3 Unexpected advantages.**

The universally missed camaraderie of meeting f2f to plan a conference seems to have been mitigated by the fact that there has been continuity on the planning team over time - experience lent confidence. There was so much less travel time needed as planning meetings moved online, and planning became more asynchronous via shared documents. Time spent previously on physical spaces, access, printing, refreshments, rooms, and security, could be spent on the central focus - the sharing of the research. The entire adventure saw a rapid and almost universal increase in the agility and skills across the cohort - organisers, attendees, and those sharing their research.

## 4. Recommendations.

Future conference planners are advised to keep four factors in mind from the start - format, technology, communication, and purpose:

- Format - consider a hybrid model, a conference hosted on campus but with facility to broadcast and receive communications from remote participants which could evolve the online conference experience into not just a once-off Space Oddity, but an ongoing Space Odyssey allowing for wider participation;
- Technology - use every affordance of the technologies available; seek the help of those experienced and agile in deployment; offer as many modes of transmission (f2f, remote, live, recorded, electronic, hypertext, subtitles etc) as the technology will allow;
- Communication - open as many communication channels as possible, as early as possible and keep in contact with conference participants - offer support, and deliver on the offer; during the conference, avoid participant loneliness by inviting use of the online chat space, using clearly defined breakout spaces, and providing a “*corridor space*” where random virtual meeting can take place; be stringent on timekeeping and deadlines, but also as patient as possible with the people;
- Purpose - in all decision making, keep the purpose of the event, with identity and values, to the fore.

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