

**Science Communication Conference
24 & 25 May 2010**

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Summary

- A total of 399 persons attending the conference were invited to provide feedback on the event and 275 attendees responded, giving a 69% response.
- Overall, respondents were satisfied with the organisation of the conference (93%), and most (83%) felt that the conference had either met or exceeded their expectations.
- The majority felt that there had been enough time for networking (83%) and that the programme was well structured (76%). Indeed, three-quarters of respondents mentioned the '*opportunity to network*' as the key reason for their attendance at the conference.
- Most respondents (91%) thought that the conference had been inclusive, ensuring attendees felt welcome to make comments and that there was enough time for discussion (78%).
- Other main benefits of the conference cited by respondents included '*breakout sessions*,' '*discussion time*,' and the '*variety of sessions*'. In terms of the actual presentation sessions, those most positively endorsed included: the climate change plenary, '*How to engage effectively with parliamentarians*' and Tim Smit's keynote speech.
- Just over half of respondents (56%) felt that basing the conference programme on calls for proposals was a good idea and should be the approach used in the future. Interestingly, nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents were not aware of opportunity to submit a proposal to be included in the conference.
- Interestingly, in terms of absolute numbers, a larger number of respondents than last year felt that the conference had fallen below their expectations (n=49 for 2010 compared to n=22 for 2009). The cited reasons for this included that the conference incorporated too much discussion within the workshops and a lack of invigorating ideas and sharing of new practices.
- About three quarters of respondents suggested improvements or changes to future conferences. The most mentioned suggestions included: *improving session descriptions*, *more structured networking time*, *having fewer parallel sessions* and *focussing more on practical sessions and sharing new ideas*.
- Almost all respondents were satisfied with the venue (93%) and the majority (80%) were satisfied with the catering.
- In terms of the evening reception, most found this a good additional opportunity for networking (68%), though some were unclear of the format for this event in advance and thought more substantial food would be on offer.

Introduction

The 2010 Science Communication Conference was held at King's Place in London on 24 and 25 May and was organised by the British Science Association in partnership with the Wellcome Trust.

After the event, an online survey was sent out to delegates and speakers asking them to feedback on the conference (n=406)¹. The survey was online and open for two and a half weeks with two reminders being sent out. A total of 399 conference attendees received the email inviting them to take part in the survey, 275² responded, giving a 69% response.

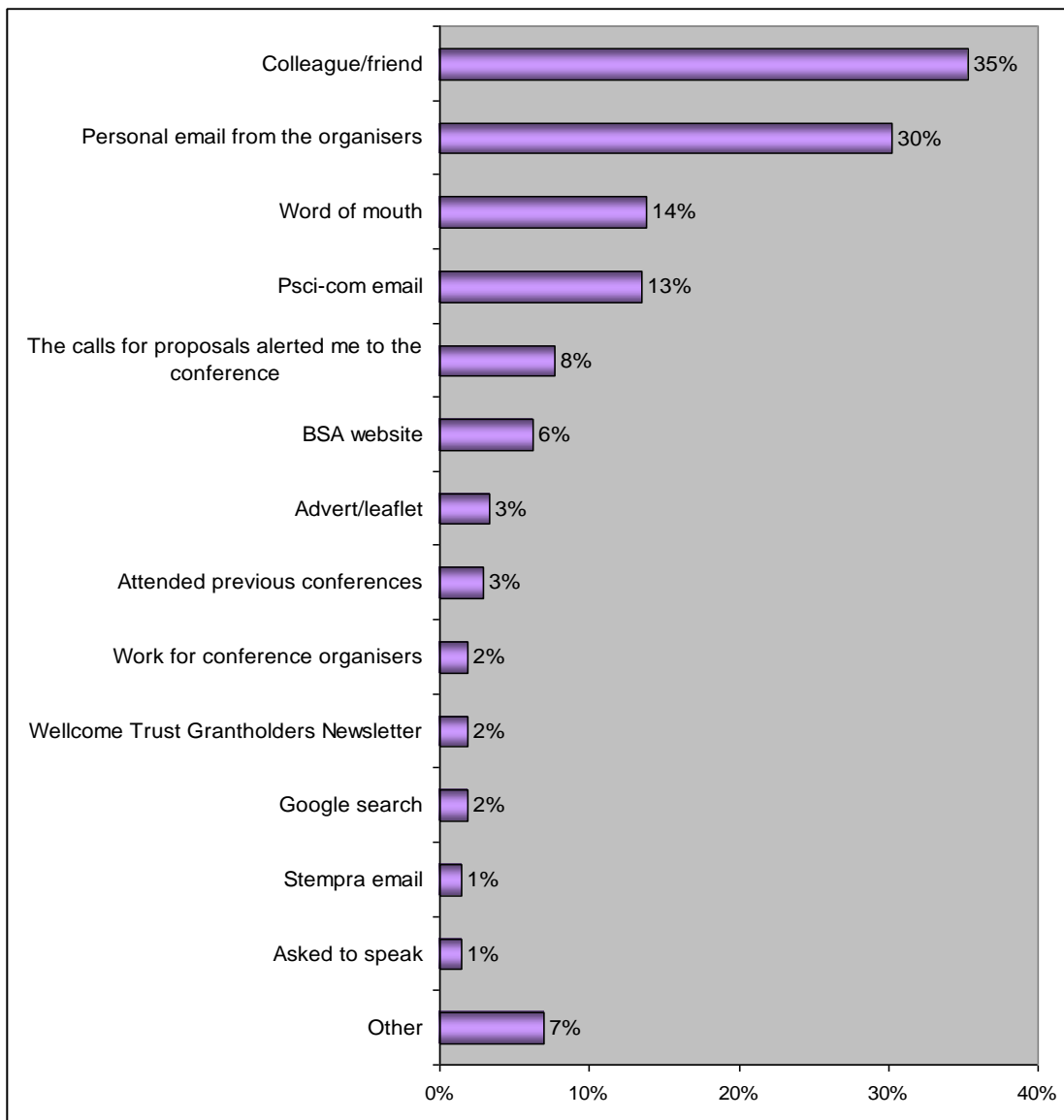
[It should be noted that all percentages in this report are rounded and may not add up to a hundred.]

1. Pre-Conference

1.1. Hearing about the conference

As with last year's conference, the majority of respondents found out about the conference through a colleague/friend (35%) or via an email from the organisers (30%) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Finding out about the conference



Base: All respondents (n=275)

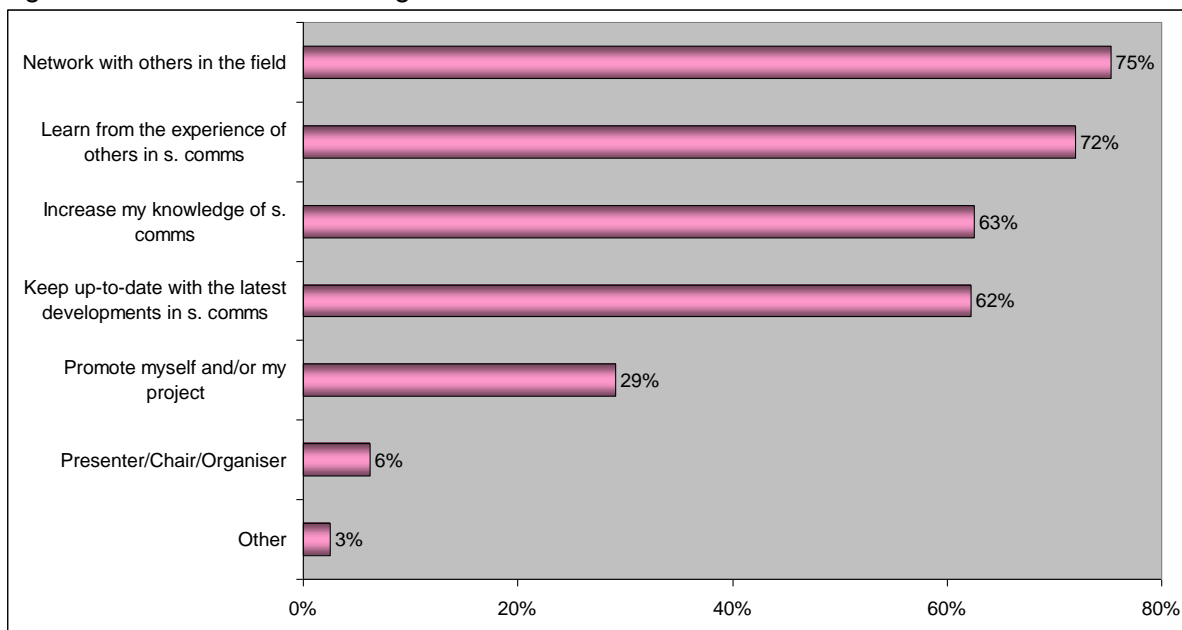
¹ 343 were delegates and 63 speakers

² 236 were delegates and 39 speakers

1.2. Reasons for attending

Three quarters of respondents (75%) attended the conference to network, while 72% hoped to learn from the experience of others in science communication (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reasons for attending the conference

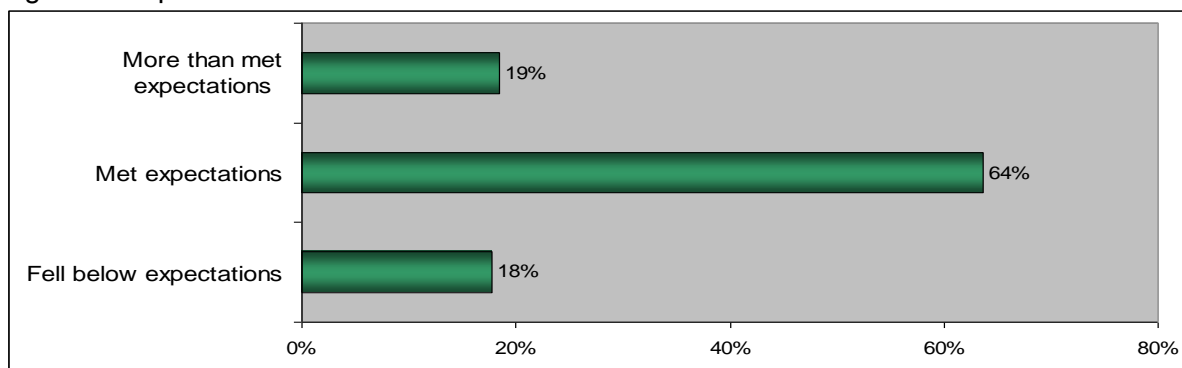


Base: All respondents (n=275)

2. The conference

As in the previous year, the majority of respondents felt that the conference had 'met' or 'more than met' their expectations (83%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Expectations of conference



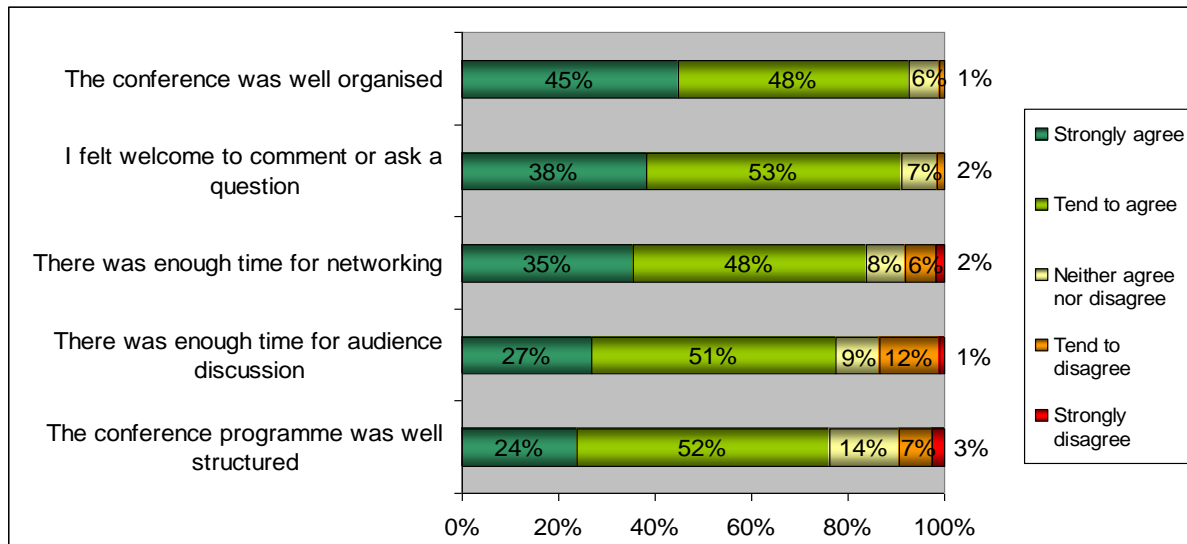
Base: All respondents (n=275)

Interestingly, a larger proportion of respondents than last year felt that the conference had fallen below their expectations (n=49 for 2010 compared to n=22 for 2009). The reasons for this included that the conference incorporated too much discussion within the workshops and a lack of invigorating ideas and sharing of new practices. Some felt that there was not a good balance of different communication styles covered for different audiences with varying levels of existing engagement in science.

2.1 Conference organisation and structure

Over 90% of respondents felt that the conference had been well organised and provided a good environment to ask questions. Over 75% also felt that there had been enough time for networking and audience discussion and that the two days had been well structured. General satisfaction with conference organisation and structure was noticeably increased from last year.

Figure 4: Rating the organisation and structure of the conference



Base: All respondents (n=275) Not shown: N/A

30% (n=82) of respondents explained their ratings more in detail, many describing that the conference was well organised.

“Overall I thought the conference was fantastic, one of the best I have been to for a long time.”

Interestingly, while a number of respondents did feel that there was too little time for audience discussion and networking, others thought there was too much. In addition, a number of other more specific issues and potential problems with the conference were raised including:

- session clashes
- that the ‘structured’ networking sessions were not always well structured
- that too many people attended each small group session
- that sometimes the content of sessions was not well thought out
- some rooms did not meet the requirements of the sessions
- rooms were not always set up as requested by speakers

Comments included:

“I felt there was too much time for discussion, but not enough content across the conference to really make me feel like I was being updated with any new ideas, policies or research.”

“I prefer fewer/no parallel sessions, they prevent delegates from updating/participation on a variety of issues. I would have wished to attend most of these sessions.”

“The event itself in terms of refreshments, venue and logistical considerations was very well organised but I found the structure and content of the sessions badly thought through and the range of speakers unrepresentative of the world of science communication.”

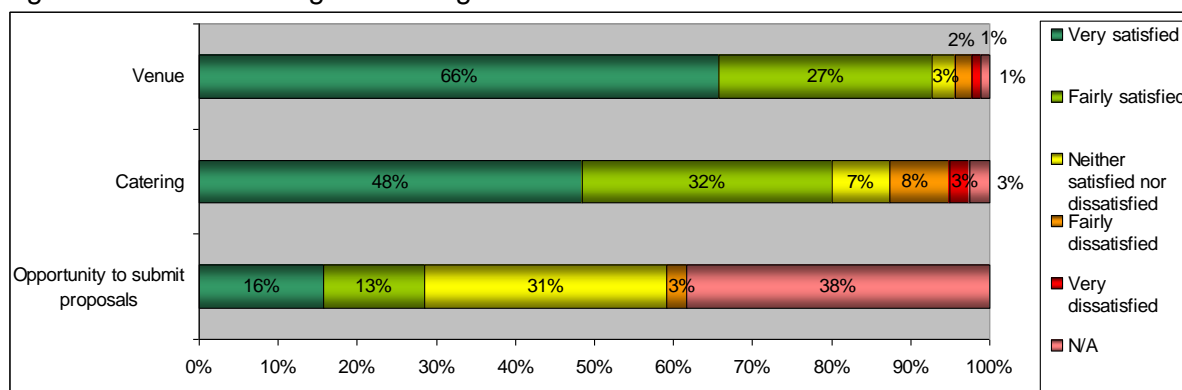
2.2 Venue and catering

Most respondents were satisfied with the venue (93%) and 80% of respondents were satisfied with the catering (see Figure 5).

Nearly two-fifths (38%) of respondents appeared to be unaware that they could submit a proposal to be included in the conference. Although just over half (56%) thought that this was a good approach and should be used for next year’s conference. Some respondents felt that proposals should be included, as long as they are within a balanced agenda that caters to the needs of the audience.

Most respondents (92%) were aware that the Wellcome Trust was one of the organisers of this year’s conference.

Figure 5: Conference logistics ratings



Base: All respondents (n=275)

2.3. Conference drinks reception

One optional feature for conference delegates, was the conference drinks reception on day one. The informal drinks reception was held at 06 St Chad’s Place, a bar and restaurant in King’s Cross near to the conference venue. Around two-fifths (42% n=170) of all conference attendees were expected to attend the conference drinks reception; 111 respondents to the survey attended (40%).

Levels of satisfaction with the evening drinks reception were high; approximately 70% of respondents attending the drinks reception enjoyed the additional opportunity to network while at the drinks reception (see Figure 6).

A third (33%) of respondents attending the drinks reception provided additional comments about the event (n=37). Most comments relating to the format of the drinks reception were positive though a number of attendees did describe some uncertainty with the format of the event, the logistics of the bar area to support networking and that more substantial food should have been on offer! A few attendees reported that the venue was too hot and others would have preferred a location closer to the conference venue.

Comments included:

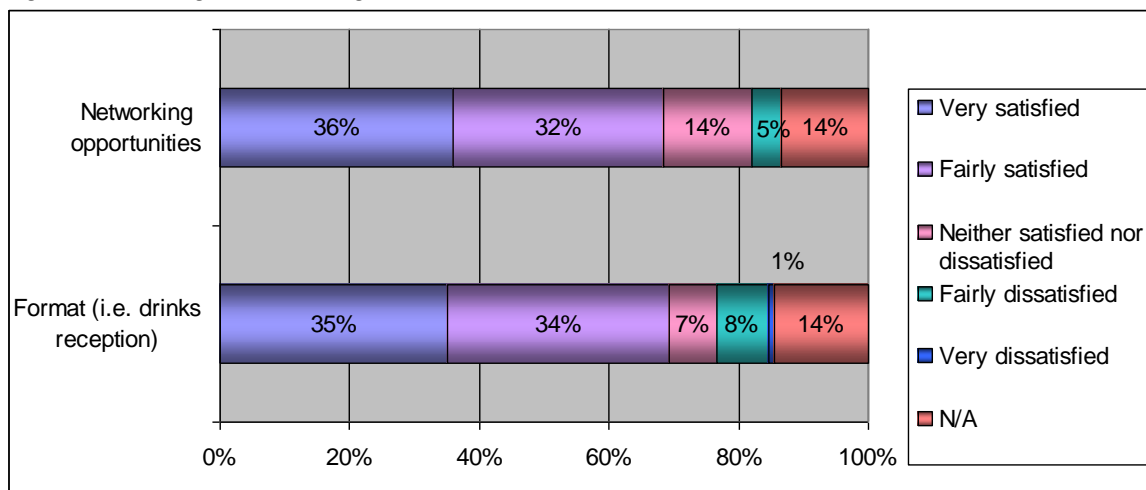
“The venue – 06 St Chad’s Place – was ideal for informal and relaxed discussion.”

“I think that the format of the evening could have done with a bit of explanation beforehand. It was great, but people didn’t really know what was going on and it wasn’t clear at the start what the deal was.”

“A drinks reception is fine but there also needs to be some more substantial food on offer. Canapés are fine but I think a drinks reception with buffet would be good.”

“The venue made it awkward to network. People sat around tables so there wasn’t much movement. Plenty of tables that you can stand at would have been better.”

Figure 6: Rating the evening event



Base: Those attending the drinks reception (n=111)

3. Main benefits and suggested improvements

3.1 Most useful parts of the conference

Attendees were asked to identify the most useful part of the conference; most (89% n=245) respondents provided comments.

As in the previous year, the opportunity to network formally and informally, including networking opportunities at the evening drinks reception, was the most mentioned benefit.

“Networking, getting different perspectives, hearing about others’ ideas. Hearing people’s successes and experiences can be motivating and inspiring.”

“It’s always great to take time out from a busy working life to meet others in the same field. The lunches and drinks reception were great for an informal catch up with people.”

Some respondents felt that the substantive presentation and plenary sessions had been most useful, particularly the session on climate change and the keynote speech by Tim Smit.

“The general discussion that followed the climate change plenary. It was a very useful debate that covered many issues about the problems/challenges within science communication.”

“Tim Smit’s keynote address first thing on the Tuesday was incredibly inspirational and enjoyable and a great way to start the last day of the conference.”

A number of respondents also described the parallel sessions as particularly useful. The most mentioned sessions included ‘How to engage effectively with parliamentarians’, ‘Engaging Young People in Research’, ‘Engaging hard-to-reach adults’ and ‘Elephant in the room’. Many respondents also enjoyed the breakout sessions and the opportunity for discussion.

“Breakout sessions were great and the environment established for discussion was excellent.”

Some respondents appreciated the variety of sessions and the chance to share information and learn from others.

“Being able to hear from a range of inspiring professionals who challenged perceptions and shared knowledge and best practice – it was truly energising. Also the amount of time available to network – it felt both relaxed and buzzy and an excellent use of time spent out of the office.”

“The number of people attending provided great potential to meet different people with different communication backgrounds and emailing the delegate list before the conference was very helpful. Variety of sessions was good but sometimes made it hard to choose between them.”

Others simply appreciated all aspects of the conference and the opportunity the conference gave them.

“Overall, the most useful part of the conference for me was the chance to take a step back from my day-to-day working life and re-examine why I work in science communication and why I think it’s important. So it was a really good opportunity to see the bigger picture and take stock!”

“I do not often say this, but every part of the conference was useful for some reason or another.”

3.2 Suggested improvement and/or changes

Around three quarters (n=209) of participants chose to make comments around potential changes and possible improvements for the future. Respondents chose to make comments on a variety of topics, comments relating to the most mentioned themes are outlined below:

- **Session descriptions** – session descriptions and titles were often misleading and could have been directed to specific delegates

“I thought some of the sessions could have been better described - the titles didn’t seem to match up to the content sometimes. I went to ‘Audience segmentation and Impact’ to find that it was mostly about evaluation, which was not clear from the session title.”

“Better descriptions of the sessions, e.g. ‘this would be suited to someone working in event organisation’ or ‘this would suit a press officer’. Some of the sessions weren’t relevant to me as a press officer, particularly ‘Engaging with older people’”

- **Networking** – the ‘Jargon’ session was not conducive to networking and there could have been more ‘directed’ networking sessions

“The networking event was unnecessarily complicated and structured around an issue of very little interest to me - Jargon. The setting of such arbitrary tasks that did not require us to find out about each other actually made it harder to talk to people and get to know where they were from and what they were working on. I think a networking session is a good idea but the task (if any) needs to be about finding out who people are.”

“I think that overall the conference was of an exceptional standard however, it would be better to have more networking time and hear what all the different people have to say about science communication.”

- **Parallel sessions** – too many parallel sessions meant that delegates missed out on sessions of interest. A number of delegates suggested having a plenary session for feedback from breakout and parallel sessions.

“Having so many parallel strands meant that inevitably there were always at least two things I wanted to see on at the same time. But I don’t think there’s any solution to this - it just reflects the fact that there was so much good stuff going on. The long breaks at least provided a good opportunity to find out from colleagues what the other sessions had been like.”

“Feedback from the individual breakout sessions to the audience as a whole due to the fact that you never got to hear what was discussed elsewhere.”

- **Focus of the sessions** – respondents often felt they were being used as ‘focus’ groups, rather than learning anything new, and would have preferred more practical sessions with more varied content.

“The only comment that I can make, and which I heard a lot of other people making was that we didn’t appreciate being used as a focus group for some of the session. I appreciate the symbiotic approach of engagement but we sometimes felt that we had paid a lot of money to come and learn about science communication and were often the source of information gathering.”

“I would have liked the sessions to be more focused upon sharing innovative examples of engagement and communication rather than being asked to discuss, brainstorm etc. Workshops are good if they are used in a more focused way but it seemed like people were just using workshops for the sake of it.”

“I would like more evidence/discussion of what is actually being done - i.e. the different formats/events that are being used/taking place at different venues/institutions across the country. I would like it to be more practical and less theoretical.”

“More varied content. On Monday, I attended two sessions which involved a lengthy discussion about the definition of 'dialogue'. I didn't see the point of discussing the semantics at length.”

- **Other issues** – Respondents also mentioned a number of other improvements, including: cutting down on breaks and allowing more time for discussion, better organisation of the venue for smaller breakout sessions, more tables and chairs at lunch and more choice for vegetarians. Some respondents suggested having an area where delegates could post messages for other delegates.

“Why not try an updates board type idea? I don't think there is space for a massive networking session, so maybe have an area where people can post an update about themselves/their organisation relating to what they are doing at the moment/since the last conference/points of real interest to the science communications community...”

3.3 Additional comments

A number of respondents (n=82) choose to make additional comments. All comments were around issues raised previously in the report. A selection of comments are included below:

“I thought this was the best of the series organised to date and left feeling inspired and motivated.”

“It was my first time and I found it extremely useful for tips and meeting other people and getting a 'feel' for what's going on. I have come away with a very positive attitude!”

“It was informative in parts and good to meet others so enthused about science communication and public engagement. I think if I were to attend the next conference I would want more case studies and opportunities to learn new skills.”

“The sessions felt better chosen and organised than last year. I think there needs to be some degree of feeding back from parallel sessions to the full conference – there were sessions I couldn't attend and although I met some people who had been in them, I would have liked a more integrated summing up.”

“Overall I found this a very interesting event, and was not disappointed that I had attended. I personally would have liked to learn more about ways to engage and keep science interesting for people who are already engaged in science to a certain degree such as getting the best out of science undergraduates and science students in schools, as well as how to engage heard to reach audiences.”

“Actually, I only just now learnt that you'd asked for proposals this year. That's interesting - it's not a bad idea insofar as it makes things more inclusive and you've got a better chance of getting stuff from outside the usual suspects, but on the other hand I wonder if that's part of the reason I was disappointed with the breakouts this year. Doing things on a proposal model probably makes it tougher for you to control quality. I'd say that if you've got a way to refine your selection process for next year it would be a good idea to keep at least some of the conference on a proposal basis, but otherwise I'd probably get more out of a more tightly curated programme.”

“Well, there's always comment about the catering so here's my two penny's worth! Serious lack of sustenance at the morning coffee break; they were very strict about what food combinations you could have for lunch (!) and didn't allow for a second helping even if you didn't want pudding. Was a bit strange to be faced with a small ration and then left over food being taken away...but better than last year!”

“It felt that our discussions (e.g. dialogue) were helping the speakers/organisers with their research/work but we didn't really get any new info fed back to us from this.”

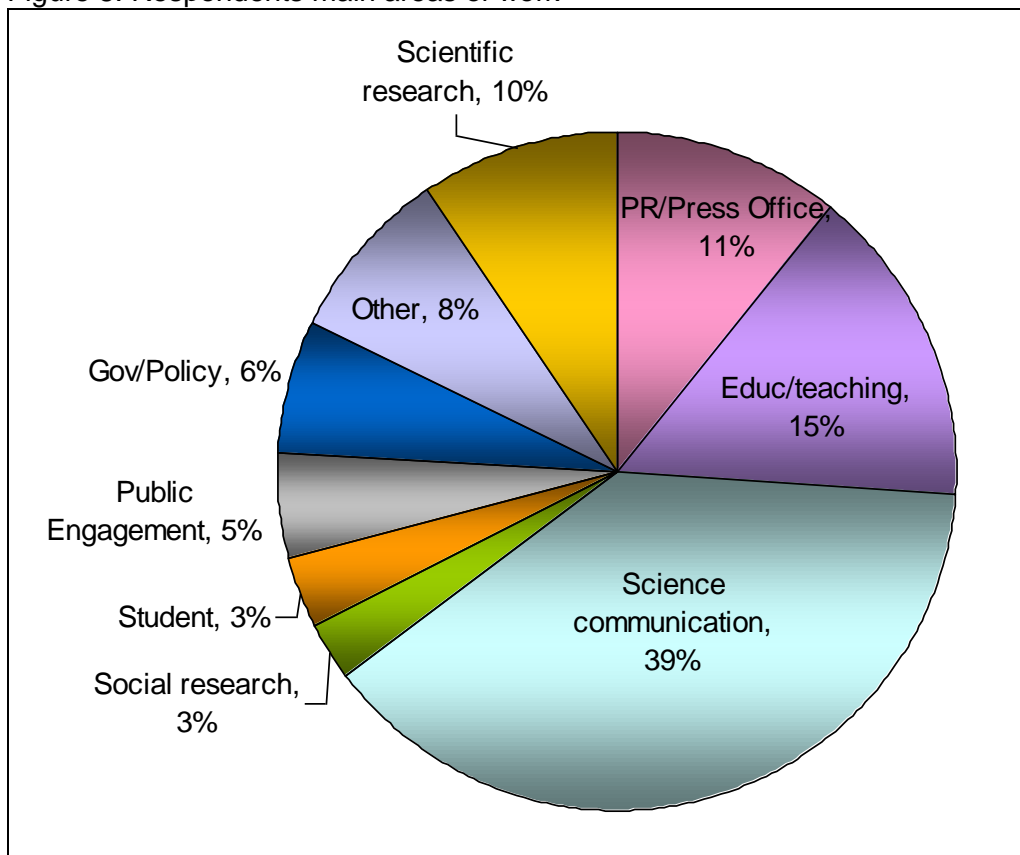
“I was a bit disappointed after hearing how good the conference was in 2009. I would recommend returning to the previous format.”

“This is still the most important conference for our work. I feel I have been quite critical, but if the conference didn't take place we would all lose out massively.”

4. About you

The majority of respondents were delegates (n=236), while 39 were speakers. The largest proportion of respondents worked in science communication (39%).

Figure 8: Respondents main areas of work



Base: All respondents (n=275)