

Science Communication Conference

Evaluation Report

The 2008 Science Communication Conference took place on Monday 19 & 20 May 2008 at the Institution of Engineering and Technology, Savoy Place, London.

The conference was supported by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, The Wellcome Trust and BP.

348 people took part in total, including 283 delegates, 17 chairs and 48 speakers. This was fewer than last year's 320 delegates. The conference ran over 2 days with 310 participants on day 1 and 254 delegates on day 2.

92 people applied for a bursary of which 29 were awarded. Bursaries were awarded to 5 individuals from campaigning groups, 5 freelancers or individuals from small businesses, 14 scientists and 5 science communication students.

124 delegates and speakers (36%) completed the online evaluation form which was available for 3 weeks after the conference. Of these completed evaluation forms, 84 had attended the conference on both days, 33 attended on just the Monday and 8 attended just the Tuesday. 17 of the evaluation forms were completed by speakers.

During the booking stages of the conference, web hits went up from around 10 hits to 45 hits a day.

The format of the programme changed size and style from previous years as we wanted a new look to the conference. Less information was used in the programme to give it a cleaner look and anecdotally delegates liked the new look.

Following suggestions from people in the field to open out the programming of the conference, in 2008 a stakeholder group was set up to bounce ideas off and gather suggestions about sessions and speakers. Only one face-to-face meeting was held as most of the communication was done via email.

An online booking system was used and worked well. It allowed bookings and income to be monitored easily and helped the team to allocate sessions to suitable rooms. An invoice facility was made available this year, which ran smoothly thanks to the cooperation of the BA's finance team.



Summary of feedback questionnaires

Delegates and speakers described why they had chosen to participate in the conference

Respondents cited many reasons for coming to the Science Communication Conference. Many attended because they wished to network with others in the field (45%) and to stay up to date with new ideas and developments in the field (30%). A significant number came to the conference to learn more about science communication, to get an overview of the field and to learn from fellow practitioners (25%). Some of these were new to the field (5 delegates mentioned this). Other reasons for attendance included presenting and promoting their own work (mentioned by speakers and delegates alike), to get ideas for new projects and for career development and job opportunities. Several had been recommended to participate by colleagues and employers.

Typical statements:

"[I attended] to increase my knowledge and awareness of science communication and network with other people in the field."

"[I] wanted to see how other people approached science communication and identify new developments and opportunities to get involved at a higher level."

"New to the field of science communication, I was looking to get a better understanding of the kind of projects that exist, successes and failures of past and ongoing initiatives, and get a general overview of where the field stands today."

"[The conference] has a good reputation. It was a good chance to discuss my field."

Respondents told us about their expectations and whether they were met

20% of delegates and speakers stated that they had no particular expectations, or didn't mention whether their expectations were met or not. 54% said their expectations were met or exceeded, 23% said their expectations were mostly or partly met. 4% said that their expectations had not been met.

Expectations broadly echoed the reasons people chose to attend, and there were some interesting comments here:

"I expected to meet a number of like-minded people and to share ideas. Yes my expectations were met and I felt that everyone was actually much more responsive to me than if I were attending a scientific conference, which was greatly appreciated."

"I expected the conference to give me an up-to-date overview of international science communication activities and also to be an opportunity to meet people working in the area. The conference did give me a useful update on activities in the UK but it would have been good to find out what was going on internationally – in the US and elsewhere in Europe. The structured networking really helped to meet other people working in the area."



"My expectations were partly met. However, the strand (Inspire) seemed to be too focussed on the organisational side of things than on the actual inspiration."

"I expected a high quality conference with excellent speakers, sessions and lots of interesting delegates. I was not disappointed. I enjoyed the conference immensely and found it to be very informative."

People whose expectations were not met suggested that they had hoped for more experience to be shared, that there would be more of a forum and discussion, and for conference sessions to attack more up-to-date problems (rather than 'classics' such as how to inspire young people). Three people expressed surprise at people who were absent, particularly those from industry.

Participants told us what they enjoyed most about the conference and what they would change to make it better.

The networking opportunities were by far the most celebrated aspect of the conference, with 63 participants cited networking, including the structured networking and the breaks, as the part of the conference they enjoyed the most. Many other aspects of the conference were praised, including the wide variety of participants, speakers and sessions, the programming, good organisation and friendly atmosphere. Practically every session was singled out by at least one respondent, but particular praise was received by the plenary sessions from Melvyn Bragg and Graeme Jones. Other particularly popular sessions were the Beacons for Public Engagement, 'Churnalism', STEMPRA, and science festivals sessions.

"I most enjoyed the streaming of events for education, engagement and media. It made it easy to go to relevant bits of the conference. I was also very impressed with the quality of the speakers – they were very professional, interesting, and I learnt much more than I had anticipated."

"I was pretty sceptical about the speed networking, but actually it worked very well! It identified lots of new people and then I followed up with them in my own time afterwards."

Criticisms were also varied, and many aspects that were praised by some delegates were criticised by others. 11 made suggestions about ways to improve networking at the conference, including different methods of introducing people, and suggestions of better venues for this purpose. In terms of subject matter, several wished for more detailed sharing of best practice, and others suggested more internationally-focused sessions. Other participants suggested different speakers or sectors that prospective speakers should come from, particularly industry. Finally, a few suggestions were made regarding the venue, catering, and other practical aspects of the conference. Despite the variety of criticisms, 38 respondents gave no answer, said they would change nothing or said something positive.

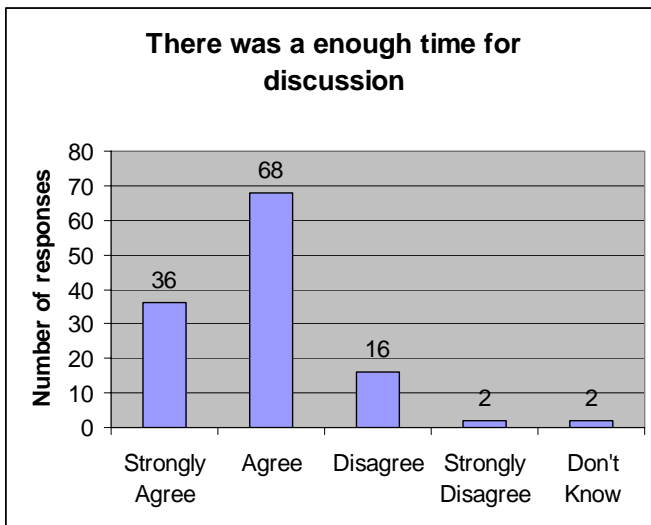
"I would build in more of a 'showcase' section, whereby delegates could present their projects, perhaps in breakout sessions, and get feedback from other delegates and/or speakers."

"Perhaps a wider mix of sectors – it was very Higher Education-heavy and while I don't mean any disrespect to the university sector, science communication is/can be much broader than HE and the media."

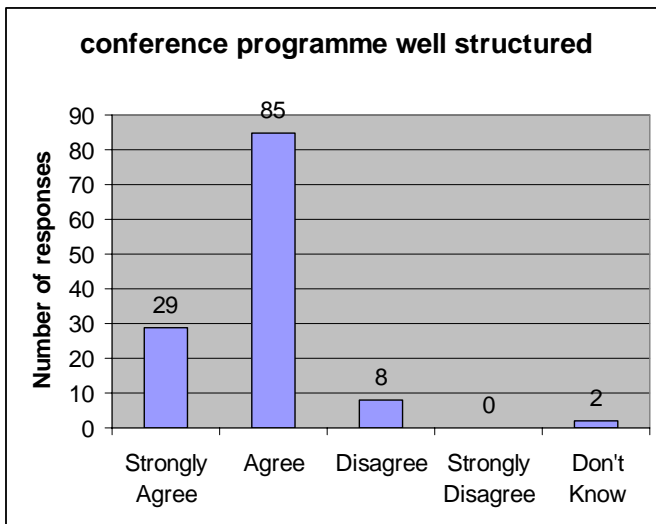


Respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with several statements about the conference.

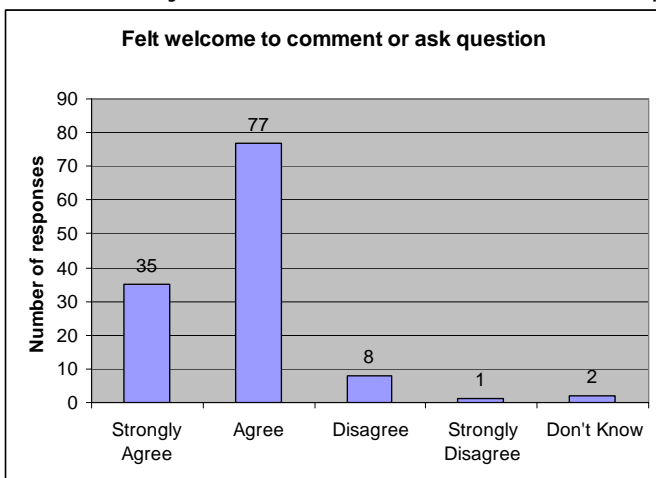
84% agreed that there was enough time for discussion



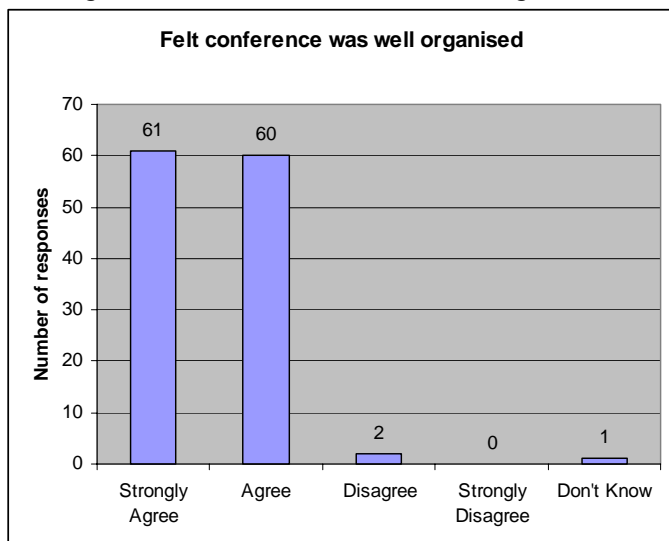
92% agreed that the conference programme was well structured



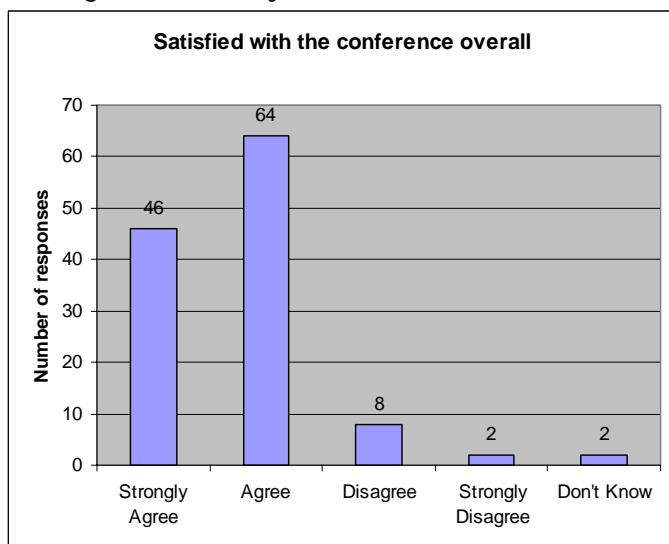
90% said they felt welcome to comment or ask a question



98% agreed the conference was well organised



89% agreed that they were satisfied with the conference



Delegates and speakers were asked what days they would prefer future conferences to be held

43 (35%) prefer Monday and Tuesday

18 (15%) prefer Tuesday and Wednesday

22 (18%) prefer Thursday and Friday

54 (44%) had no preference or didn't know

Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

When asked about science communication Working Lunches, 79% expressed an interest in taking part.

Respondents were asked to suggest suitable keynote speakers for the conference

Many people were mentioned:

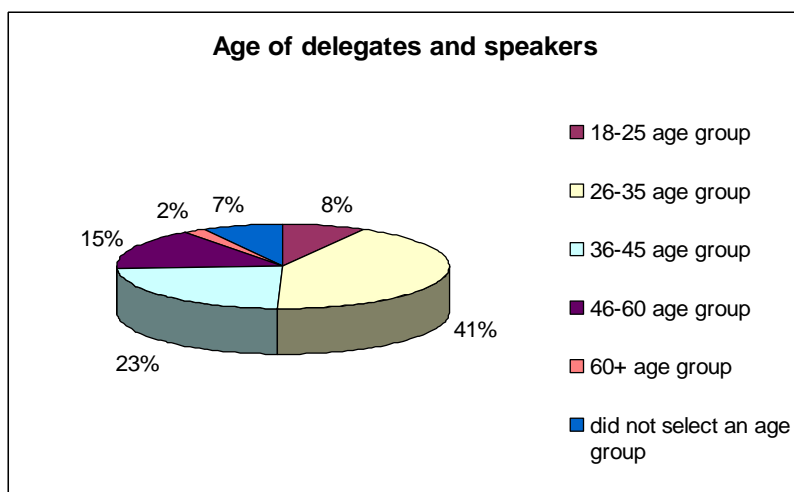
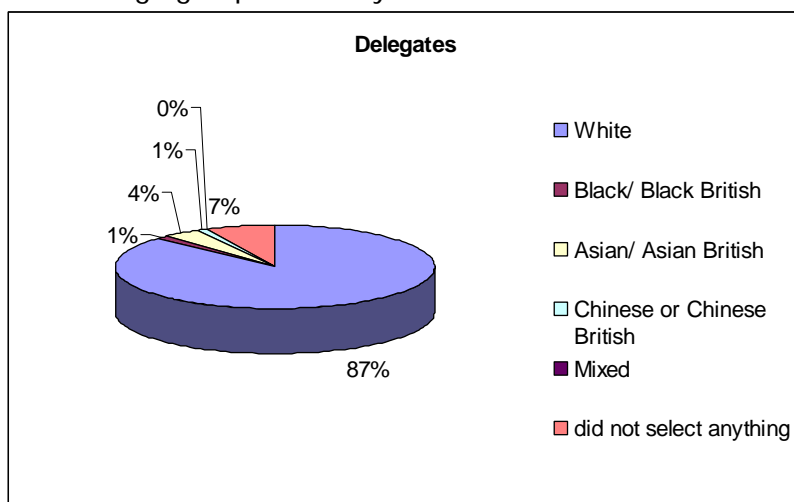


Jim Al-Khalili, David Attenborough, Iain Banks, Martin Broughton, Bill Bryson, Frank Burnet, Nick Clegg, Heather Couper, Douglas Coupland, Richard Dawkins, John Denham, Penny Fidler, Kevin Fong, Richard Fortey, Mariella Frostrup, Ben Goldacre, Al Gore, Susan Greenfield, John Gribbin, Judith Hann, Adam Hart-Davis, Stephen Hawking, John Humphrys, Steve Jones, David King, Patrick Moore, Matt Ridley, Tony Robinson, Nick Russell, David Shukman, Iain Stewart, Kathy Sykes, Robert Winston, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Prime Minister.

Other suggestions included a non-scientist to give their perspective, CEO of RCUK, an American science communicator to bring an international element, a TV presenter who covers lots of science e.g. Pallab Ghosh, Mark Henderson, or Phil Willis, chair of the House of Commons IUSS Committee, President of CBI.

Demographics

The majority of delegates (87% including speakers) attending the conference are white. The most common age group is 26-35 years old.



The majority of the delegates and speakers selected science communicator as their main area of work. Many of the delegates selected more than one area hence total number well exceeds number of delegates. Other areas of work specified included funders, software designers, doctors involved in public education, a librarian, an artist and a botanic garden interpreter.



