

## **Getting Your Head around Conferences!**

**Rosie Gordon, Sam Richardson and Laura Zakubinska**

We know that going to a conference can be intimidating. Why should you go? What are they for? What do you do there?

In this guide to getting your head around conferences, we hope to answer these questions and provide tips to help you prepare yourself as best as possible. It has been written by three members of the Resilience Revolution in Blackpool, who have a different amount of experience attending such conferences. We hope to share our learning with you, to make attending a conference easier and to give you an idea of what to expect when you go.

### **The Basics**

#### **Part 1: What do you want to achieve at a conference?**

##### **Reasons to attend a conference:**

There are many reasons you might wish to attend a conference. You might be attending as part of an organisation you are involved in; or you might have an interest in the theme of the conference. We'll talk a little bit more throughout the guide about what you can expect from a conference and what happens, but there are loads of reasons why you might be going. You might want to challenge yourself to learn something new, make new connections with likeminded people or build on existing knowledge you already have. From our experience it is worth thinking about:

##### **How should you prepare for a conference?**

- Research the venue location and local transport options. Make sure you know exactly how to get to the venue and how long it will take you to get there on your chosen method of transport. You really don't want to be getting lost and running late during the busiest time of the day in a city.
- Pen and paper – Although any good conference will provide you with this you may have an idea or inspiration while on your journey to or from the venue, and you

might just want to draw it out as not all ideas can be typed, sometimes you just need to mind map. So don't forget your favourite pen and notepad.

- Opening Questions, Conversation Starters, Chit Chat – Prepare some ice breaker questions, or statements that can establish a personal connection. Is this your first time at this conference? What year did you come previously? What's your biggest accomplishment so far this year? What are you most looking forward to hearing about?
- Saving a copy of the planned schedule might be helpful to reference throughout the day, either online or a printed out copy, and it is always useful after the conference to jog your memory on what happened during the day too. The schedule may also detail how much networking time you have, and you may want to make the most of this time.
- Find and connect with other guests – Check out the Twitter feed and search for the official conference hashtag in advance, and take the time to connect with other people before you arrive. This is a fantastic way to warm up the conversation before the conference and know who to look out for during the event.
- Business cards – If you're representing an organisation, make sure you have plenty of up to date business cards with you to pass to the people you meet during the event. If you don't have business cards, make sure you collect as many as possible so you can follow up with everyone after the conference.
- Follow up plan – A good conference will leave you with lots to think about and do, and many people to contact. Make sure you have a plan so you don't miss out on benefiting from the inspiration and lessons from the conference.

### **How do you make the most of your time at conferences?**

So, you might be thinking that a conference isn't for you or you might be a bit nervous about attending, but there are plenty of things that you can do to make sure that your time at the conference is enjoyable and worthwhile. Start by having something to look forward to, this could simply be that it is your first time at a conference or you are looking forward to attending a workshop! When attending a conference just enjoy the opportunity to learn. There will be a lot of interesting information from different speakers and people, and you

might not understand all of it but that's fine, just engage with what you understand and enjoy learning. It is OK not to know everything about what is being said. As well as being willing to learn from others, be really confident that what you have to share is important and people can learn from you too!

## **Part 2: What happens at a conference?**

### **How do I submit my work into a conference?**

Usually, on an online conference page, there will be a clear link for submissions. Whether you are submitting on your own, or submitting in a team for a symposium, you are likely to be asked for your: name, occupation, institution (if applicable!), title of your presentation, and most importantly, you will be asked to write an abstract. 'Abstract' is really just the academic term for 'summary', and organisers will need this to know what you will be talking about and think about if your presentation fits with the theme of the conference. Make sure you carefully read how conference organisers would like you to submit your abstract; they may ask for a specific format (such as PDF) and it is normal to be given a word count (a word limit). Most conferences will ask for digital submissions, but if this is not possible for you, email the organisers and ask if paper submissions can be accepted. Poster presentations may also require an abstract, or, in some cases, they will ask you to submit a draft or complete poster. It is likely they will have a specific format (size, layout, orientation, font size etc) they want you to follow in designing your poster, so make sure you check for any specific requirements.

### **What kinds of presentations do conferences have?**

- Keynote Speech: Keynote speeches (also simply called a 'keynote') are the main presentation of a conference day and are linked to the main theme of that day. They are a great way to get a feel for the rest of the day. If you're wondering which presentation in the conference is the keynote, organisers will usually label it clearly in the conference programme. If they don't, you can usually spot a keynote by seeing if there are any other parallel sessions occurring; there will be no parallel sessions on at the same time as a keynote.
- Parallel Sessions: These are presentations given by one or more people (a 'symposium') on a specific topic that is related to the overall theme of the conference day. There will be different projects being presented at the same time, at different locations in the conference venue, this is why they are called 'parallel'

sessions. They will all run for the same length of time, at the same time. So think carefully and choose which session you would like to go to!

- **Symposiums:** A symposium is a presentation given by a group of people on a very specific topic, usually this means there is a narrow focus. Presenters will talk one after the other about related projects, or about different perspectives on the same project. These types of presentations can be used as a keynote, but they are usually reserved for 'parallel sessions'.
- **Poster Presentation:** Poster presentations are exactly what they say on the tin. They are posters (sometimes digital, other times they are printed on paper) that give a summary of a project or other piece of work. Presenters will stand next to or nearby these posters and will usually prepare a short 2 minute talk for those who approach to find out more about the poster. They are a great way to get up close and personal with people presenting their research, in a more friendly setting. You can take your time looking at what is being presented and asking questions you might not feel comfortable asking in a presentation. Often, poster presentations are given by students at different levels of study, but this isn't always the case.

## **Our Top Tips**

### **General tips:**

- Bring some comfortable shoes - you'll be spending a lot of time on your feet!
- Don't overthink things.
- Don't be afraid of speaking to other people – everyone is there to learn.
- Regardless of your job role or title, everyone goes to a conference on equal footing. We are all here to learn and share our own expertise.
- Pack a conference survival bag – filled with things to get you through the day. You can find more out about this later in the guide.
- Carefully think about what sessions you want to attend.
- Don't be afraid to experience local culture.
- Check with the conference organisers if there is a Twitter hashtag for the conference that you can follow and post to.
- Emergency money – always bring extra cash.
- Have a list of emergency contacts.
- It's okay not to know everything – you have your own expertise.
- Check in with people you rely on.
- Have a way to follow up with people after the conference if you don't have an email address.

- Have an alternative plan for travel.
- Don't be afraid to give feedback; constructive criticism is a great way to help organisers improve, but also remember it is very hard work organising a conference, so be kind!

**Tips for presenters:**

- Try not to read off your paper while presenting, if possible.
- Make your presentations engaging – if appropriate, try some audience participation.
- Do not cram too many words on one slide – think about the interesting key points.
- Make sure you are aware of the timing of your presentation.
- Think about possible feedback you might get from the audience, and be ready for questions.
- Use inclusive language. Using inclusive language means that the words we use do not leave people, with different backgrounds and experiences, out of important conversations. For example, rather than using the word 'dinner lady' we should use the word 'welfare assistant'. This is gender neutral and therefore inclusive to both men and women. Check out this great resource from The Chartered Insurance Institute, about inclusive language:  
<https://www.cii.co.uk/media/10120292/inclusive-language-guidelines.pdf>

## **Checklist Page**

Below you will find some checklist items that we think are really important. Feel free to add your own too, and use your personalised checklist before you attend the conference!

**Checklist Items:**

1. Emergency contact number in phone/ bag
2. Conference Survival Bag: water, pen and paper, snacks, tissues
3. Extra money in case of emergency
4. Comfortable shoes that are still conference appropriate
5. A printed conference programme (if this is not provided by the conference venue)
6. A list of parallel sessions you want to attend
7. --
8. --
9. --
10. --

## Glossary

Here are some words you might hear being used at a conference!

- **Attendee** – Anyone attending the conference i.e. academic, young person, community member.
- **Delegate** – A delegate is someone who is attending a conference on behalf of an institution, organisation or group, e.g., a social worker might attend on behalf of their team.
- **Delegate/Attendee Pack** – Usually, you will receive this at the start of the conference when you register. This will have all of the information you should need for the whole time you are at the conference.
- **Professor/Doctor/PhD Student** – These are titles that refer to different academics. This just means that they are attending from a University or are researching a topic related to the themes at the conference.
- **Conference Guide** – A conference guide tells you all you need to know about the themes of the conference. It will include details of the venue, location of different speeches and workshops, and timings of the day.
- **NGO** – Non-profit Government Organisation. These are usually charities such as Oxfam, Save the Children or World Wide Fund for Nature.
- **Congress** – Typically held once a year per discipline (subject area), highlighting the achievements and notable results in that field. These are typically attended by leaders in that field and feature a series of invited talks.
- **Closing Panel Debate** – Opportunity at the end of a conference to share ideas and key takeaway points from the conference.
- **Breakout Session** – This gives attendees an opportunity to get into smaller groups and learn about different things. They are normally shorter sessions where multiple people can share their learning at the same time. This could be in a workshop style or a series of short presentations. Generally multiple breakout sessions take place at the same time so choose wisely!

- **Stand** – A small stand, usually overseen by two or more people, showcasing projects/information from an organisation.
- **Workshop or Interactive Presentation** – Workshops are interactive sessions that can vary in length from approximately an hour, as part of a breakout session at a conference, to a full day. These sessions tend to start with explanatory or introductory information, followed by engaging the audience during a participatory activity. Workshops and interactive presentations are particularly well suited for demonstrations, learning new skills or procedures or debates.

## Who Are We?

HeadStart Blackpool is a National Lottery Community Funded programme, aiming to increase resilience in children and young people from the age of 10-16 years through creating a Resilience Revolution across the whole of Blackpool. The aim is to prevent young people from experiencing mental health issues in the future, by building a Resilience Revolution across Blackpool, taking a whole town approach to beating the odds whilst changing the odds for everyone who lives, works or volunteers in Blackpool.

Building resilience across the town will support the community when coping with adversity.

We're working closely with young people and their families to better understand how to build resilience across our whole community in Blackpool.

## Biographies

**Rosie** – I'm Rosie Gordon, a PhD student working with HeadStart's Research and Evaluation Team to evidence the effectiveness and sustainability of the Resilience Revolution. I am proud to say that I went to school in Blackpool; now, I want to be able to give back to the town that nurtured my love for learning. I am the Student Representative for the [International Resilience Revolution Conference 2020](#). Therefore, I am hoping to find exciting ways for students at all stages of their academic journey to engage with and learn from members of the community and each other.

**Laura** – I'm Laura Zakubinska, one of the apprentices of the HeadStart team. It's my job to ensure that the administration and organisation of revolutionary activity runs smoothly. I settled in Blackpool from Poland and I'm bi-lingual; this skill enables me to support young

Polish speakers to engage fully in the revolution, by translating material and offering 1-to-1 support in schools. I have had a wonderful couple of years in my apprenticeship, and I am immensely proud to be a member of the HeadStart Team. I know that I'm more than ready to continue with my studies as a Business Administrator. I'm proud of the person I have become during my apprenticeship, and I'm looking forward to what the next year has to bring. My role at the [International Resilience Revolution Conference 2020](#) is to ensure the smooth planning and preparation prior to the conference as well as dealing with any trouble shooting during the conference.

**Sam** – I am Sam Richardson, a Youth Worker for the HeadStart Blackpool programme. I was born and have lived in Blackpool for most of my life, leaving only to study and then coming back to find work. I am really proud to be from Blackpool because although it has its challenges, I am part of a community working to make the town a better place to live. I achieve this through my role at HeadStart by working with young people to build resilience. My role at the [International Resilience Revolution Conference 2020](#) in Blackpool will be to co-deliver a keynote speech.