



ABCD conferences for an integrative and sustainable science

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Topics: Biodiversity | Water & Development | Society

ABCD: All continents, balanced gender, low carbon transport and diverse backgrounds. These criteria should shape the scientific conferences of the future.

A new format for conferences aims to facilitate much-needed change in science. Researchers from all over the world, from all gender and from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, are to be explicitly invited to scientific conferences and research networks. It is well known that mixed and inclusive groups are better at facilitating novel insights and promoting solutions to complex problems. At the same time, this new format aims to reduce the environmental footprint of conferences and workshops.

Networking researchers across borders

Today, scientific conferences usually bring together participants from the same research environment, often the same individuals that usually represent just a small sector of the scientific community. In addition, the current way of organising conferences involves significant travelling, especially by airplanes. This not only results in high carbon dioxide emissions, but often excludes participants from countries with fewer financial resources. "We think this must change - in the interests of both society and science," demands Ole Seehausen, head of department at Eawag and Professor of Aquatic Ecology and Evolution at University Bern. "We want to connect researchers virtually and across the boundaries of current networks".

Ole Seehausen, together with Florian Altermatt, groupleader at Eawag and Professor of Aquatic Ecology at the University of Zurich, and Rosetta Blackman, postdoctoral researcher at Eawag, therefore developed the new ABCD format for scientific conferences. ABCD stands for all continents, balanced

gender, low carbon transport and diverse backgrounds. The format combines three types of talks: live-streamed, pre-recorded and personal. This makes it possible to reflect a diverse range of viewpoints, reduce the environmental footprint and at the same time lower the barriers for participants from economically less well-endowed countries, provided that the physical location of conferences rotates between continents.

First experiences from the World Biodiversity Forum

The research team also immediately put its proposal into practice to test and demonstrate its feasibility. At the "World Biodiversity Forum" from 22 to 28 February 2020 in Davos, Switzerland, they organized the session "Aquatic Biodiversity: state and challenges ahead" in accordance with the new format. Potential speakers were selected not only for their scientific excellence and relevance, but also for the ABCD criteria. Prior to the session they were given the option of live-streaming, pre-recording or attending the conference in person, provided they travelled in an environmentally friendly manner.

The experiences were varied and instructive. All three talk formats were used by the speakers. When organising the session it then became apparent that it was not at all easy to implement criteria A, B and D as the own scientific network is often limited to researchers from Europe, North America and a few places elsewhere. Moreover, many researchers who were asked did not respond to the invitation to give a talk. "We have to solve these difficulties by expanding our own networks beyond our immediate cultural and scientific vicinity" says Blackman.

Virtual ice-breakers for networking

Feedback from the participants was that time for networking and discussion at an ABCD conference should also be scheduled. Often the breaks are the most important reason for researchers to attend conferences, because this is where most information flows and important contacts are made. The research team therefore suggests that virtual "ice-breakers" with all speakers should be held before the events. It is also important to allow sufficient time for discussion after each presentation. For this purpose, not only the speaker but also the audience should be transmitted live to facilitate the exchange of information. And last but not least, social media offers new opportunities for networking.

The need for new formats for scientific conferences is growing not only in the context of sustainability. Even in times of the current COVID-19 crisis with regional and global travel restrictions, demand is growing. "We hope that the ABCD format should not be restricted to conferences but also for other meetings of working groups or research projects. We envision that our approach will not only reduce inequities and carbon footprints, but become essential for the finding of solutions to complex challenges in science and society," Altermatt is convinced.

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Related Links

ABCD Conference

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