2020-2021 Virtual Conference Season in Review

Summary of Conference Season

841 faculty, students and professionals attended a virtual Science Atlantic conference in 2020-2021.

Most conferences experienced a small decrease in attendance when compared to average conference attendance during a typical year. The largest decrease was seen for AUGC, the first conference of the season. Virtual attendance was down 42 participants below the average. Attendance picked up over the following months. ChemCon, on the other spectrum, topped average attendance by 25.

All together, our 2020-2021 conferences hosted:
- 358 Student Presentations
- 17 Keynote Speakers
- 6 Panel Discussions
- 6 Virtual Social Events
- 2 Grad Fairs
- 1 Math Contest
- 1 Programming Competition

107 awards were given to top students for their scholarly excellence.
Attendee Experience - data from post-conference surveys

- **90%** of respondents felt their conference was a great learning experience
- **80%** of respondents thought the conference made them feel like part of a community
- **75%** of respondents felt the conference provided opportunities to connect with others in their field

When asked about the positives and negatives of virtual conferences we found that:

- **75%** respondents felt the online setting made it easier to attend
- **67%** of respondents felt like the online setting made effective use of their time; **BUT**
- **68%** of respondents felt that the **online setting made it more difficult to connect**

Overall, the majority of respondents expressed that, regardless of the format, they were likely to attend future Science Atlantic conferences.
Platforms

Each conference committee selected platforms based on their individual needs. Science Atlantic staff provided support to committees with their decision-making process through information sharing and one-on-one discussion.

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<th>Virtual Conferencing platform</th>
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![Platforms Utilized](chart.png)
Summary of Supplementary Support Utilized

A total of 350 hours of supplementary support was provided by Science Atlantic staff for the 2020-2021 virtual conferences, amounting to $9570.00. Income was generated for cost recovery purposes only. The majority of the funds were used to extend Richard Inkpens position. A minimal amount of funds were used to offset the cost incurred to cover Michelle’s time spent on conferences that is outside the scope of her current job description.

Benefits of Supplemental Support

Organizing committees who did not opt into the supplemental support, found the core support provided to be helpful.

“Science Atlantic had many documents that were quite useful to reference when organizing the conference.” - Organizing Team 1

“[The Science Atlantic support was ] Amazing!! Extremely helpful and always willing to set up times to meet and provide guidance!” - Organizing Team 2

Those who did opt-in appreciated the extra support.

“I wanted to let you know that the support being provided by Richard and Michelle is so incredibly helpful. Thank you so much for helping facilitate this.” - Organizing Team 3
“The help from Richard and Michelle at SA was great especially during the set-up phase. That is worth paying for.” - Organizing Team 4

“[Science Atlantic Support was] Terrific! Richard in particular was fantastic. In our most recent meeting, someone asked if there was some way we could hire him every year to help keep things running smoothly.” - Organizing Team 5

“Thanks again to Michelle and Richard for all of your help. The conference would not have run nearly as smoothly and would not have been as engaging without your help.” - Organizing Team 6

Challenges with offering Supplemental Support

- **Uncertainty regarding level of support required**
  - There was a lot of uncertainty around which conference(s) would opt in to the supplemental support and how much support they would require. In some cases, Science Atlantic staff would not receive confirmation until a couple of weeks prior to the conference.
  - The amount of time needed by organizers varied widely, so budgeting staff time was difficult. Income from supplemental fees is required to pay employees, so last minute decisions created employment uncertainty.
  - In some scenarios, the amount of time initially confirmed would later be increased or decreased based on need. This impacted staff budgeting.
  - Uncertainty regarding whether and how much support would be required made it challenging for staff to complete non-conference projects on time as they were sometimes paused due to last minute requirements for conference assistance.

- **Uncertainty regarding conference income**
  - Registration for virtual conferences had no precedent, which created difficulty in estimating income.
  - In some cases, costs were unclear/underestimated, so sponsorship was not a priority. As well, funds were not confirmed by some Deans and departments until very close to the event.
  - Some organizers and Division committees were uncertain how and whether Holding Account funds could be used for supporting online conferences.

- **Unclear roles and responsibilities**
  - At the beginning of the season, we did not have a clear outline of what needed to be done to pull off a virtual conference, so roles were unclear. It was difficult to determine how organizers envisioned their role and how they wanted Science Atlantic to support them.
  - Uncertainty about who had authority to make decisions caused delays (organizers, Division Committee Chairs, whole committees, staff).
○ Now that we have a more concrete formula for virtual conference planning, it will be easier to have clear conversations with organizers to confirm responsibilities.

- **No established timeline for virtual conference planning**
  ○ Conference planning for the virtual setting requires a different set of tasks and a completely different timeline when compared to in-person conference planning.
  ○ Since Conference-in-a-Box is geared to coordinating in-person events, the majority of its resources were not relevant.
  ○ At the beginning of the conference season, we did not know what tasks were required nor how long each task would take. This made it difficult to manage staff and organizer time effectively.
  ○ Now that we have been through a conference season, staff can provide a timeline for organizing and decision making.