



How to share knowledge in a pandemic

30th June 2020

Blog by Dr Nabil-Fareed Alikhan, Quadram Institute Postdoc and Micro Binfie co-chair

When a pandemic hits the world but your research develops across a community of peers around the globe, how do you share knowledge when physically meeting has become impossible? That's been the challenge facing scientists worldwide and the obstacle scientists at the Quadram Institute wanted to overcome.

Conferences and seminars had come to a halt as public health measures kicked in and quarantines were announced in country after country. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic had proved the mother of invention and so the weekly Micro Binfie virtual conference was born. For the uninitiated, Micro Binfie is portmanteau of microbial and bioinformatics, and the Quadram team has been running [Micro Binfie podcasts](#) successfully for the past six months.

This agile response from Quadram Institute Bioscience bioinformaticians created a dynamic virtual conference that brought together researchers from more than 80 research institutes, public health agencies, and universities globally.

The challenge for the team was avoiding the static and potentially stultifying "one talks to all" format of a traditional online presentation. The wider community wanted a more social and dynamic approach.

Quadram post-doc and Micro Binfie virtual conference co-chair Dr Nabil-Fareed Alikhan said: "These kinds of online seminars are usually very one sided, with someone presenting slides and talking with often poor sound quality. That was not what we wanted, we really wanted to capture some of the interaction you would get from a physical scientific meeting as well. We really did try to facilitate the social & networking aspect as much as we could – and that is certainly appreciated in the feedback we received."

The chosen format was seminars delivered via Zoom and then virtual "coffee breaks" running afterwards on [Discord](#) (a free online platform designed for creating communities of users in a chat channel). A "pub quiz" with bring your own drinks was also run as a purely social event.

The team ran weekly [Micro Binfie conference](#) sessions, chaired either by Nabil-Fareed Alikhan from Quadram Institute Bioscience in Norwich, or co-chair Lee Katz, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, USA. The Micro Binfie talks were also posted on [YouTube](#).

And how did the virtual seminars work? Nabil explains: "Throughout the sessions, people would watch the presentation and then chat about the content separately on Discord. It's difficult to quantify but there was a lot of good discussion. Afterwards there would be a general discussion over drinks (of course, people had to

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. [Learn more](#)

Accept

In fact, in addition to the positive feedback, the event evaluations showed 50 per cent of respondents rated the seminar 10 out of 10. The lowest rating was a very creditable 7 out of 10. A total of 202 people registered from all over the world and the weekly seminars averaged 100 attendees. The virtual audience stretched from Argentina, to Canada, the US, across Europe, to Pakistan, South Africa and New Zealand.

The Micro Binfie virtual conference as a response to the pandemic, but what might the experience mean for the future? A virtual conference you can join at home is a much more family-friendly solution, and for public-funded health and research agencies travelling to conferences is a cost that can only support a select few. Virtual conferences provide a clear path for academic research to reduce its carbon footprint. The virtual conference has a part to play and it's here to stay.

We'll leave the final word to one of the delegates who took part in a Micro Binfie virtual conference and said:

“Congratulations! You came through for the scientific community, during a pandemic, while people were unsettled at home. You presented a series of high-class talks, for free, as well as collegial discussion and fun networking. This was an incredibly positive move, in both a professional and personal context. This is a hall mark, a pioneering event, and something that should be lauded. The organizers were “organized”, professional, collegial and communicative. This series is the example that all virtual conferences should aspire to.”

MICRO BINFIE VIRTUAL CONFERENCE 2020

Taking QIB bioinformatics meetings online

Accessible live sessions were recorded and are free to view



Knowledge exchange Research - Industry - Academia - Government



Set an example
Cited on social media as
how to do a virtual
meeting well



52%
of participants who provided
feedback gave the programme
10/10

Progress in pathogen and disease research

“
Your insights are extremely useful for both my PhD project and personal learning about microbial bioinformatics.
Conference participant”

39%
of participants stated that the content was 'VERY relevant' to their supporting work



91%
of participants were not senior level scientists*



* Career stage broken down into by seniority



For more information please see microbinfie.github.io/conference2020

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. [Learn more](#)

Accept