



#ecsite2022 — a festive and reflexive gathering of science communicators

Reviewed Conference

2022 ECSITE CONFERENCE,
HEILBRONN, GERMANY, 2–4 JUNE 2022

Reviewed by

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Abstract

The 2022 Ecsite conference took place in Heilbronn, Germany, from 2–4 June after two years of virtual meetings due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This review presents some highlights of this event, including two memorable keynote talks by disability activist Sinéad Burke and author/educator Lucy Hawking.

Keywords

Public engagement with science and technology; Science centres and museums; Social inclusion

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Review

The “European Collaborative for Science, Industry and Technology Exhibition” (Ecsite) was founded as an international non-profit in 1989 with the objective of promoting public understanding of science and technology by facilitating co-operation inside Europe [Roche, Davis, Stanley & Hurley, 2018]. Despite its European roots, the organisation welcomes anyone from around the world interested in public engagement with science.

Attracting around one thousand delegates, the annual Ecsite conference is probably one of the largest gatherings of science communication professionals anywhere in the world. The 2022 conference that took place in Heilbronn, Germany from 2–4 June, had an extra layer of “ecsite-ment”, given that it took place after two years of virtual meetings during Covid-19. In total, 977 delegates from 47 countries gathered in Heilbronn (see Figure 1). The meeting had a strong focus on socially inclusive and participative practice in science communication as has been called for by social science scholars who informed this area of research and practice [e.g. Massarani & Merzagora, 2014; Dawson, 2018].

The conference site — consisting of a series of marquee tents — lent a festive mood to the event, which was further amplified by the performances of dancers,



Figure 1. There was quite some “ecsite” in Heilbronn during the first week of June 2022 where nearly one thousand science communicators gathered. Seen here is (left to right): Shaun Ussher, Autumn Brown, Mairéad Hurley, Joseph Roche, and Jon Chase. Photo by Kaisa Hansson.

musicians and mime artists, not forgetting the “Ecsite choir” who performed on more than one occasion (see Figure 2). A large central tent hosted an extensive exhibition featuring the latest in design and technology that could enhance visitor experiences in science centres and museums. Experimenta, the largest science centre in Germany, was the official host and opened its doors during a so-called “Nocturna”, an evening event during which delegates could explore its cutting-edge, interactive displays.

During the opening session, eight delegates from Ukraine were welcomed with a prolonged standing ovation. Stanislav Dovgyi, President of the Junior Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, addressed the audience with a stark reminder, saying, “[At the moment I’m making] my speech in front of you there is a war that is happening in the 21st Century in the centre of Europe”. He shared several visuals of the recent destruction of science centres and museums in his home country.

Museums and cultural institutions shape society

Disability activist Sinéad Burke’s keynote challenged the audience and the whole field to use our influence to create space so that everyone can broaden their perspectives on inclusivity in science and culture. She reminded us that equal access is not only about ramps. Rather, it is about who is welcome and who is invited, who belongs and who has influence. Burke also challenged us to not distance ourselves from disability using euphemisms and ableism language, as



Figure 2. A musical celebration of science by the “Ecsite choir” was delivered during the opening session of the conference.



Figure 3. “Museums and cultural institutions shape society; your venues create experiences and conversations. Whom we open these buildings up to and invite in defines whom we include in society at large”, Sinéad Burke at Ecsite 2022.

well as not to prioritise our own discomfort in front of inclusion, instead suggesting that we adapt to a holistic model to wider collaboration (see Figure 3).

‘[The] accessibility perspective is that often we only think about this through compliance, we look to the standards. What was supposed to be a starting point is often considered the end point and disabled people are expected to just accept that in terms of their access.’ Burke’s broader perspective on inclusivity is not just about access for visitors, it is about recruitment, planning and much more.

Burkes’ keynote echoed a number of sessions dedicated to equity and inclusion, including a pre-conference that dedicated a full day to guide participants towards

developing their action plans to tackle equity, diversity and inclusion in their organisations. Led by the science engagement professionals' advocacy group "Diversci", the pre-conference workshop used the 'Purpose to Practice' (P2P) model to provide guidance. The pre-conference also celebrated the launch of the Diversci website that provides practical tools that support institutional journeys to a more diverse, inclusive and equitable organisation.

"A physicist can be popular, or a good physicist, but not both"

Lucy Hawking started her Ecsite 2022 plenary presentation with this quote, which she attributed to Dirac. She then told the story of how her father — Stephen Hawking — strived to defy this idea. For him, using popular culture was one of the best ways to show that science was done by human beings with feelings, she added. Hawking shared details of the "Stephen Hawking at work" exhibition currently being developed by the Science Museum in London (see Figure 4).

The Ecsite conference is mostly aimed at practitioners in science centres, science museums and similar settings. Over three days, break-away sessions presented learning through play, tinkering and makerspaces, as well as interactions between science and art, with a focus on hands-on activities and lively participation and dialogue. A few sessions did address research, offering opportunities to explore how science centres and museums could act as sites for research, and how collaborations between researchers and practitioners could be improved. If the conference organisers are serious about making meaningful connections between practice and research, it would make sense to create more room for researchers to present their work, and for practitioners to present research ideas and needs to science communication scholars.

As earlier reviews note [e.g. Roche et al., 2018] there is reason for concern that the cost of registering for this event (€1,166.20 per person for full registration) prohibits



Figure 4. "After my father passed away, my brothers and I decided to donate his legacy to the nation via the Science Museum in London", Lucy Hawking told delegates at Ecsite 2022. It will consist of a 10,000- (ten thousand) page academic archive and around 800 artefacts from his office at Cambridge.

participation from many organisations and many parts of the world. Notably, there were discounts for members and the organisers made efforts to provide low-cost (and even some free) accommodation options and provided travel support to 32 delegates. However, making the Ecsite Conference, or indeed any conference, truly inclusive and equitable remains a challenge.

Ecsite 2023 is set to take place in Valletta, Malta from 14–17 June 2023.

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