

Gordon McQueen's personal account of UKSG 2023, inspired by Mary Catherine Bateson's "Our Own Metaphor: A Personal Account of a Conference"

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**Gordon McQueen, Open Research Officer,
London School of Hygiene and Tropical
Medicine**

The following is a personal account of the 2023 UKSG Conference and Exhibition, inspired by Mary Catherine Bateson's *Our Own Metaphor*, itself a personal account of a seminal conference, only mine is without the same talent. However, both accounts are written without the confident hallucinations of the artificial kind.

Wednesday

Hurting through the Chilterns on a morning train to Glasgow, my journey was broken by the regular visits of an inquisitive miniature dachshund. This was a good sign. As we speed northward-bound, the signature-tune from the 1971 classic, Get Carter, was playing in my head. Not that I'm heading anywhere near the Toon, for today, I'm heading further north to where some of my closest UK relatives came from. As although I was born and bred in Hong Kong, my name would give the game away that half of my family originated from Scotland. My only memories of Glasgow were visiting distant relatives whilst on holiday in the UK as a child in the 80's, so the beautiful sunny weather and the wonderful regeneration along the banks of the Clyde was a delightful surprise.

First tip on not looking like a tourist: In Glasgow, people stand on the left on escalators, like they do in Japan. Unlike the potential of upsetting a Londoner on the Tube, the people in both of these places are friendly and mindful of others. No time for me to dawdle however, as after a much needed freshening up, it was time to head to the first event on my agenda, the first-timers reception.

I'm generally a rather shy person and my slight hardness of hearing means that gatherings could be challenging at times, so I'm delighted to say that I was made very welcome by members of UKSG and fellow first-timers. Darting from one circle to the next, I went from chats about the hidden Charles Rennie Mackintosh's studio in Chelsea, London, to recounting the time I was made to sing on stage in China to some made up Oasis lyrics, before ending up listening to questionable theories as to why Easter egg chocolate tastes different from regular chocolate. All this talk of food and with a busy day ahead of me, I decided, quite out of character, to grab a quick bite at a famous Scottish-named fast food franchise, served with a side of Glasgow salad, before retiring back to the hotel for some much needed rest.

Thursday

Bright and early start on Thursday and after chatting in the lift with people I recognised from the night before, I headed out to catch my first glimpse of the famous traffic-coned statue of Wellington before a quick ride to the Scottish Events Campus. Striking up a conversation with a fellow delegate on my walk from the station, I was reassured that the Glasgow venue is considered the best from the seasoned attendee.

This place is big. On my way in, I spotted the optional stickers delegates may use to signify their 'comfort distance preference'. A first for the conference, I understand, and a great feature in recognition of different needs within a very busy venue. Entering the Lomond Auditorium for the first time reminded me of the ginormous cinemas they have in Canada (far bigger than the grandest in Leicester Square, London). Sitting near the front with my fellow award-winners, I decided to give a simple gesture when my name was called, refraining from shouting Prince Akeem's, "I am very happy to be here!" that was playing through my mind. The rest of the day would involve going up and down escalators and finding the right room. To this end, the staff at the venue were fantastic, standing at strategic points to guide everyone along their way.

I was really looking forward to **Mac-Anthony Cobbiah's** presentation on the importance of Open Science in the dissemination of African knowledge and he did not disappoint. Working in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, we have two very active units in Africa and plenty of researchers working across the continent. Cobbiah's presentation has given me a much needed insight into the cultures and challenges faced by many and how I can adjust the trainings sessions we are planning in the upcoming months to help researchers make their work available to all.

I was equally keen on joining the breakout session on **AfricArXiv** for similar reasons and was aware that almost everyone else was heading to something else. That's the issue with sessions that run concurrently, but each breakout session runs twice, so it's choosing the right ones to get the most interesting questions and responses from the audience that seems to be the trick. I was glad I chose the ones I did, as Mac-Anthony Cobbiah and **Adetoun Oyelude**, both of whom were speakers at the plenary session earlier, gave a much needed African perspective in response to the presentation from representatives of European institutions.

A quick drink with my sponsors (the **Royal Society of Chemistry**) in the afternoon gave me a much needed break and chance to play some of the games and competitions in the exhibition hall, from the nostalgia-inducing Pac-Man arcade machine at the **Prenax** stand to being rigged up to a machine that poured a pint by measuring your level of concentration at **JoVE**. There is very much the sense that some exhibitors are gauging whether to push for a sale or save their

breath as you're unlikely to be the person making the decisions. The games certainly helped to break the ice or perhaps they were a ploy to help commercial publishers break free from the monopolies held by the tote bag and branded pen industries.

After meeting up with Beth and Ella, my fellow award winners, it was time to find our way to the Crowne Plaza Hotel for the eagerly awaited Supper and Quiz night. Joining a lively bunch from **Mark Allen** and **Jennifer Pearce** from **Cardiff Met**, the fun packed evening was made even better as we clinched the winning prize after a nail-bitingly close final round (I gave my moral support to the answering of every question, I might add). A lovely walk along the Clyde with newfound friends was the perfect wrap to what was an amazing evening.

Friday

Plans of a late start were put to rest as I woke up to find myself with high anticipation for the day ahead. An early ride to the **University of Strathclyde** gave me the chance to catch a glimpse of the mural of **St Mungo** looking bonnie in the bright morning sun - Patron saint of Glasgow, with a passing resemblance to **Chris O'Dowd**.

Taking in the views from the speakers whilst checking the live opinions over social media and following the multiple questions streaming in on the conference app, I soon realised that my attempts to live tweet in a room of speed typists were in vain. There were a lot of voices to take in and the struggle with my cognitive limitations and the issues of inherent biases was very much the focus of opening part of **Masud Khokhar**'s morning presentation on the need for leaders to bring everyone together under the same journey.

The shared journey of new models in open access was my next stop and with **LSHTM Press** launching in 2022 as an open access publisher, I was very interested in hearing the alternative approach led by **Stockholm University**. Pioneering is a noble endeavour, but I was a little apprehensive of the challenges and hostility that lay ahead, from commercial publishers and researchers resistant to change. I was later reminded of this presentation the next day as **Gwen Evans** of **Elsevier** pointed out that there is lots of hidden work in publishing, just as there is in librarianship, which people outside of that field don't necessarily appreciate. Question is: how much of these additional elements do researchers genuinely need?

A packed auditorium with the addition of an annex reflected the huge impact Plan S has made five years on from the initial guidelines, with **Robert Kiley** of **cOAlition S**' comments causing quite a stir for some. It's interesting to see that, for some of these sessions, publishers were represented by speakers with a background in research and librarianship. Is this the norm or a way to justify some of their actions? Interestingly and perhaps as a result of this line-up, we were reminded that Plan S is just one model in the global push for open access and the question remained as to how much say the research community actually had in all this. Kiley's opinion that publishers are purely service providers and the suggested shift to a 'payment for services' model certainly ruffled a few feathers, with comments still being heard well into the next day.

The weather turned for the worse for the highlight of the day and on my way to the Gala reception, I ducked into a taxi to stay dry. The driver gave me what I can only describe as a rather morbid tour of Glasgow, as he pointed out local landmarks like the church where the last notorious crime of a particular kind took place in Scotland. Arriving wet yet unscathed (the entrance turned out to be on the other side of the building), I made my way through to what I

can only describe as the Met Gala filled with librarians and publishers. Chatting amongst some now familiar faces, I plucked up the courage to say hello and thank you to a fellow librarian, **Hannah Crago**, whose work on the gamification of library training has given a new life to live sessions we provide at LSHTM. The chance of a private view of the collection at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum was an unexpected bonus to a wonderful day and evening.

Saturday

How do you follow a Friday evening with a free flow of drinks? Hands down to the organisers for scheduling a great panel filled with major players and concluding with a fun-filled presentation from **Andy Cope** for the final half-day on Saturday.

Talk of ecosystems and the need for different sides to stop the bickering made me think of **Niklas Luhmann**'s system theory, but the question in my head was asking what exactly is this autopoietic system that is keeping itself alive? And where does it lead? The feeling was unanimous across most of the room when Khokhar said that publisher negotiations were a huge waste of time and resources. Some of the thoughts touched upon could easily fill a whole day of panel discussions and beyond. To borrow a phrase from Cope's presentation, "Shift happens," choosing a good attitude is the first steps to our transformation rather than waiting for change.

As people started making their way with suitcase in tow, I fulfilled my own AOC moment by tracking down a tippie of Scotland's national drink, a can of Irn-Bru. I rounded off my final day by celebrating with a lovely Korean meal near the beautiful Garnethill area before the time came for me to say good-bye to the wonderful city of Glasgow. I had the most fantastic time at the first in-person conference after what felt like a very long time and would like to give a huge thank you to UKSG and the Royal Society of Chemistry for providing the chance for me to attend this year's gathering. I met the most amazing people from across the field and beyond. Made connections that will make a lasting impression, both on my career and helping others across the scholarly community.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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