

EGU21-1940

<https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-egu21-1940>

EGU General Assembly 2021

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The Future of Conferences: Lessons Learnt from EGU20: Sharing Geoscience Online

Sam Illingworth¹, Hazel Gibson², and Susanne Buitert³

¹The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia (sam.illingworth@uwa.edu.au)

²European Geosciences Union, Munich, Germany (communications@egu.eu)

³Tectonics and Geodynamics, RWTH Aachen University, Germany (susanne.buitert@tag.rwth-aachen.de)

In the spring of 2020, as the coronavirus swept across the globe, millions of people were required to make drastic changes to their lives to help contain the impact of the virus. Among those changes, scientific conferences of every type and size were forced to cancel or postpone in order to protect public health. Included in these was the European Geosciences Union (EGU) 2020 General Assembly. After a six-week pivot to an online alternative, attendees of the newly designed EGU20: Sharing Geoscience Online took part in the first geoscience conference of its size to go fully online.

This work explores the feedback provided by participants following this experimental conference and identifies four key themes that emerged from analysis of the questions: what did people miss from a regular meeting; and to what extent did going online impact the event itself, both in terms of challenges and opportunities?

The themes identified are: connection, engagement, environment, and accessibility; and include discussions of the value of informal connections and spontaneous scientific discovery during conferences, the necessity of considering the environmental cost of in-person meetings, and the opportunities for widening participation in science by investing in accessibility.

The responses in these themes cover both positive and negative experiences of participants and raise important questions about what conference providers of the future will need to do to meet the needs of the scientific community in the years following the coronavirus outbreak.