

Wanted: Young People to Assist with Conferences

The EPS condensed matter party in Leuven in August opened with two video presentations. The first was a glossy and poetic guide to the insights that only science can bring us. It was warmly introduced by a chairman of the conference, Yvan Bruynseraede, and a packed hall of condensed matter physicists sat through it patiently. But being about science in general (including the life sciences) it seemed to have little to do with the conference itself.

Bruynseraede said afterwards that he hoped it reflected the aims of the conference and this was heartfelt enough for it to be believed (although hard to comprehend).

The second video seemed to mirror the nature of the conference much more soundly. It was about Leuven, the University and its distinguished history—did you know that cartographer Mercator drew his maps at the old university, that it was the home of the father of forward-looking anatomy, Versalius, and that here physicist Jan Pieter Minckelers discovered the suitability of coal gas for lighting? With over five centuries of events to draw on there are almost certain to be distinguished figures present in its history. The now Dutch-language university claims to be the oldest Catholic university in the world.

In contrast to the University this editor is neither old nor distinguished. In fact during the conference there was some confusion over his real status. Most of his claims to be the new editor of *Europhysics News* (even to the organisers) were followed moments later by the question: "So who is the editor in chief now?" Actually there isn't one—I'm in charge—but a young face in a baseball cap was not the expected appearance of someone in charge of a magazine. In an environment where age and experience have left their mark, he looked far too young.

It was easy to forgive the mistake. This editor is half the age of his two immediate predecessors. And once his status was understood the organisers (especially Bruynseraede) were particularly helpful. However, a slightly disappointing aspect to the conference, was the lack of other young faces.

This editor will have to wait to see if there is a lack of young faces at other conferences—this was his first. He has been told that it's quite common to expect mostly experienced physicists attending specialist lectures. Fine and good. He agrees that conferences should be attractive to experienced researchers. But what about making them attractive to young physicists as well?

Here there is likely to be more confusion. Because by young he means *really* young. In Leuven, where were the hordes of outspoken young PhD students? Why at a general conference were there no lectures suitable for Europe's hottest undergraduates? And why were Leuven's own physics students serving the coffee rather than discussing the future of microscopy beyond the diffraction limit?

In this sense, the old formula is inadequate. Conferences are not appealing to really young physicists. And the old ways of designing conference programmes would need some additions before they are. Probably the first step is to include young people in conferences and their organisation, which would require effort on the part of the young as well as the experienced. A second, perhaps more radical step, would be to arrange a trip to a dark, loud and smoky techno-dance club, in tandem with more traditional events (like the evening concert of Flemish polyphony in Leuven).

There should be discussion on how to ensure the future of conferences by making them attractive to young as well as old. Conference organisers and programme committees should accept young faces. The Secretary General of the conference in Leuven, Lieven Van Gerven, had admirably committed two of his sixty-nine years to organising his tenth conference. He now intends to retire completely from conference organisation.

A young team of physicists should pro-actively suggest building on Van Gerven's success, and suggest some fresh ideas, too. Because the next time this editor goes to a conference, he wants to learn about and meet the future of Universities, as well as the past.

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