

The benefits of joining a learned society

Ryan Daniel Morris

(School of Pharmacy,
University of Nottingham,
United Kingdom)

Throughout my time as a student I have been fortunate enough to be involved in learned societies. A learned society is an organization (typically not for profit) which aims to promote the scholarly work of a particular discipline. This can take the form of running conferences, publishing literature and offering training and educational resources to society members. Whilst membership to a learned society is often a small fee (often discounted for students) the benefits that can be obtained from membership are extremely rewarding.

Whilst studying for my BSc and MSc at the University of Reading I was a member of the Royal Society of Biology. Within the third and fourth years of study (the final year of my undergraduate degree and my masters year, respectively) I was involved in running the Young Biologist Forum (YBF) with the Thames Valley Branch of the Royal Society of Biology. As a collective we wanted host-tailored careers events for biology students in the Berkshire area. Our first event in 2017 proved to be a great success and provided solid foundations for future events. At these events we were fortunate enough to have speakers talk to our student cohorts from a variety of disciplines such as medical writing, academia and clinical research. Fittingly, I came back to the University of Reading in my first year as a University of Nottingham PhD student to be a speaker in the 2019 YBF to talk to students about applying for PhD programmes.



Full circle: talking to students at the 2019 Young Biologist Forum about pursuing postgraduate research after 2 years of being on the forum's organizing committee.

One of the major benefits of learned societies is that there is very much a society for everyone. With my PhD project falling under the themes of cancer biology, cell signalling and kinases I wanted to join a society which specializes in these themes extensively. So, after my time with the Royal Society of Biology, I signed up to be a postgraduate member of the Biochemical Society.

Through the Biochemical Society I have been fortunate enough to attend inspiring conferences and seminars (in person and remotely), all at a discounted rate. My first taste of a Biochemical Society conference was in March 2019 and was handily located at De Vere East Midlands Conference Centre, located in the heart of the University of Nottingham! This conference was centred around post-translational modifications and cell signalling and was the perfect opportunity to gain a broad insight into all things cell signalling right at the start of my PhD.

With my PhD project particularly focused on the role of lipid kinase signalling in the context of prostate cancer, a few months later (July 2019) the opportunity came up to attend The PI3K/PTEN Pathway: From Basic Science to Clinical Translation conference. This was an incredible experience and an opportunity to learn first-hand off some of the brightest minds active in the lipid kinase field, and a golden opportunity to network. With this conference being quite specialized and focused on a select aspect of biochemistry, this generated a real community spirit amongst attendees, and I have since kept in touch with some of the attendees from this meeting. Bart Vanhaesebroeck and collaborators have planned a follow-up PI3K/PTEN conference in mid-2023. I hope to reconnect with some colleagues in person at the 88th Harden conference: Beyond Catalysis: Kinases and Pseudokinases, May 2022 (pandemic pending).



Say cheese! A great chance to meet the host of the PI3K/PTEN July 2019 conference, Bart Vanhaesebroeck.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, naturally training events and conferences moved to online platforms. Over this period the Biochemical Society was extremely active and generated a weekly webinar series. Each webinar aims to cover a different aspect of biochemistry; for instance there have been lectures on drug discovery, bioinformatics and vaccines, in conjunction with seminars on professional career development. As an early career researcher, I find exposure to lectures which aim to stimulate career development to be extremely rewarding.

Early on as a Biochemical Society postgraduate member, the opportunity came about to take up a role as a local ambassador for the Biochemical Society, based at the University of Nottingham. In this role I have been involved in organizing outreach events to promote student engagement with biochemistry and the Biochemical Society. I have held this role for nearly 3 years and it's been a perfect opportunity to get involved in more outreach activities.

The first outreach event I planned was in January 2020, where I hosted a lecture by Dr Ruman Rahman (associate professor of Molecular Neuro-Oncology, based in the University of Nottingham Children's Brain Tumour Research Centre). He spoke to the audience about how brain tumours exert characteristics of Darwinian evolution. More recently, in December 2021, I organized a virtual seminar with Professor

Chris Denning, professor of Stem Cell Biology and the director of the University of Nottingham's Biodiscovery Institute. In his talk he discussed his vast research career in stem cell biology and cardiovascular disease and offered refreshing perspectives on how to modernize and adapt research culture, with major emphasis on mental health. Both these outreach talks were well supported, which gave me the chance to discuss the perks of society membership with attendees.

My final two cents are these: opportunities which I have been able to experience as a member of a learned society have been fantastic. The people I have been able to meet and transferable skills I have been able to develop through outreach work have been extremely rewarding. I would highly recommend joining a learned society within your subject discipline. You never know what you could get up to. ■



Brain Cancer Through a Darwinian Lens: my first time hosting a public lecture with Dr Ruman Rahman (pictured), which was a massive privilege.



A slightly different set-up with Professor Chris Denning. The COVID-19 pandemic has not deterred us away from giving inspiring talks; scientists always adapt!