NET Conference 2021

The NET Organising Committee have not taken the decision lightly to deliver the next NET Conference as a virtual event. In their deliberations the Committee considered the following questions:

- Why can't NET2021 be delivered as a full face-to-face conference?
  - The latest data suggest that the 'second wave' of the global pandemic will continue until Spring 2021 and possibly even longer, with major uncertainty and disruption ahead. Planning for the conference in September 2021 needs to begin now – a challenging task with so many unknown variables.
  - Even if COVID lockdown measures do ease during 2021, social distancing measures are likely to continue throughout the year, significantly reducing the capacity of conferencing venues and, therefore, the number of delegates who can attend.
  - International travel restrictions (both governmental and institutional) are likely to remain in place for some time, making it impossible for international delegates and presenters to commit to attending a face-to-face conference in the UK.
  - Regional outbreaks of the virus could occur at any time, resulting in the conference being cancelled at the last minute, incurring significant cancellation costs to presenters, delegates, employers and Advance HE.
- Why not postpone NET21 until 2022 and deliver as a face-to-face conference?
  - Having already postponed the NET 2020 Conference, and having already accepted and deferred presentations, postponing again would involve disappointing presenters as planned sessions are likely to become outdated.
  - Living and working during a pandemic does not mean that all activity should cease if it can still be delivered in a different way.
  - We have experienced so many changes during 2020 that a timely dissemination of the learning resulting from this unprecedented, global pandemic will be beneficial to all healthcare educators and professionals.
- Won't the proposed conference sessions already be a year out of date?
  - With all the rapid changes seen in 2020, certainly some sessions will not be as relevant or as current as they were when they were submitted early in the year, so presenters will be given the opportunity to revise their abstracts to bring them up to date and adapt them for virtual delivery.
  - For some sessions, the delay will be beneficial in that outcomes from in-progress research projects may now have been completed and evaluated.
  - Where a session is no longer relevant, presenters will be given the opportunity to withdraw their abstract and submit a new abstract in the forthcoming shortened call for abstracts, opening in January 2021.
  - To ensure that the latest learning and innovations are included in the conference, a new theme has been included for 2021 specifically relating to innovation, good practice and learning gained in a pandemic era.
- A virtual conference doesn't provide the same delegate experience as a face-to-face conference, how can this be mitigated?
  - It's true, attending a virtual conference is very different from attending an event in person and spending time with a community of peers. Specifically, opportunities for networking, socialising and immersing yourself in a conference environment are challenging to reproduce virtually.
  - However, academic rigour, through the delivery of high-quality keynote speakers and panel sessions can be effectively delivered with a live presentation/Q&A session similar to one delivered in an auditorium.

- o Care can be taken to ensure that enough screen breaks are scheduled into the programme. In planning the programme, we also need to remember that delegates will be joining us from their homes, surrounded by their families, and conference activities should not, therefore, infringe upon delegates' work-life balance.
  - o Specific networking sessions, informal 'meet and greet' or 'tea-break chats' can be offered as optional elements for delegates to socialise with others and make those important connections with colleagues from other institutions and nations.
  - o Attending a conference that is delivered via a laptop or PC can often mean delegates will be interrupted by pressing e-mails or instant messages from work, so we need to be mindful of this and allow breaks in the schedule for people to deal with these without losing focus or concentration.
- How do we maintain the ethos and culture of the NET Conference as being nurturing and supportive to first-time presenters?
  - o This support can still be provided in a virtual setting. Optional sessions can be scheduled to provide support for first-time presenters, either individually or as a group. This could include technical run-throughs to ensure presenters are comfortable using the virtual platform; pre-presentation coaching sessions; and individual feedback meetings with the convenor.
- Even the best internet connections sometimes fail, how do we mitigate this?
  - o This is something that we cannot control but is an unavoidable risk of virtual delivery. We can mitigate this by:
    - ensuring speakers and live-session presenters are provided with a technical run-through ahead of the conference to check their internet stability and equipment;
    - technical support staff are always available to resolve any issues delegates might experience in accessing or working within the platform;
    - ensuring at least two other members of staff, in addition to the convenor, are present during each live session, so if one person's internet fails the session can still continue as planned;
    - all live sessions are recorded so if delegates lose connectivity, they do not miss the session completely;
    - some sessions can be pre-recorded and offered as on-demand sessions, or as mock-live sessions where the recorded presentation is broadcast, but a live Q&A session with the presenter takes place immediately afterwards.
- How do we ensure international colleagues are able to engage fully?
  - o Delivering a virtual conference in the UK where international delegates will be joining from different time zones, does present challenges in scheduling, but the programme can be planned into specific segments that are delivered at times suitable for delegates in specific time zones. This would allow us to address some nation-specific healthcare issues in more depth and allow international speakers to present live at a time convenient to them.
  - o All live sessions will be recorded and available for delegates to access and watch for 30 days after the conference, so that no-one misses out on any of the conference presentations/sessions.
- Would a virtual conference be priced the same as a face-to-face conference?
  - o No, the costs and overheads associated with delivering a virtual conference are not as high as a face-to-face event, and delegates do not receive the conference extras such as meals and other conference 'goodies'. The conference business model will be reworked, factoring in the cost of the

virtual conferencing platform, accessibility requirements, such as captioning and staff time, and delegate fees will be adjusted accordingly.

- What are the benefits of a virtual conference? Our experience of organising a range of virtual conferences since April last year suggests that there are a number of advantages:
    - o Confidence that the conference will take place, regardless of the spread of the virus and regional lockdowns;
    - o The overall cost to delegates is cheaper, with a reduced attendance fee and no travel or accommodation costs;
    - o There is no time required for travel so it is more time efficient in our busy working lives;
    - o There is no need to choose which sessions to attend and which to miss, as all sessions will be recorded and available for 30 days for delegates to view at their leisure;
    - o Through working together online as part of a global NET community, we will be able to learn about, share and shape good practice relating to technology-mediated sessions, and thereby contribute to a developing model of best practice that will, hopefully, be beneficial to our day jobs;
    - o Finally, you can be sure the caterers won't mix up your dietary requirements, and that your bed will be comfortable!!! :0)