When Erin's adviser suggested that their laboratory organize a symposium, the graduate student had several questions, including a very basic one: what exactly is a symposium? Now Erin, who is studying for a master's degree in conservation biology in New York, intimately understands the meaning of the word: along with several others in her lab, she has developed a symposium topic and talks, and has contacted researchers in the field, none of whom she had met before, to speak at the Society for Conservation Biology's Oceania Section meeting in Fiji next month.

As a result, Erin has considerably expanded her network in the South Pacific, where she hopes to continue doing research, and will soon meet her new contacts face to face. "This is great for me, not only to identify the people who I should be connecting with, but also getting to know them in person," she says.

Building a professional network by finding speakers is just one of the many benefits that early-career researchers can gain from organizing scientific meetings. Like Erin, they might also need to write abstracts for symposium topics and for individual talks. But the process might be even more involved – it could mean planning a year or more ahead of the event to find venues, apply for funding and approach conference sponsors. At the meeting, volunteers can hone their public-speaking skills by introducing speakers and kicking off follow-up questions after the talk. And they will find out how to develop a symposium that will address controversial issues in a balanced way, how to plan for a certain number of attendees, and how to determine the right length of time for a meeting to last. In addition, they will learn how to respond to unexpected challenges, such as last-minute programme changes or faulty audio-visual equipment.

Anne-Marie rapidly acquired novel skills as a PhD student while helping to organize the 2005 PhD Student Symposium for the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg in Germany. She and other student organizers had to solicit funding from industry, where they had no contacts, and write financial and scientific reports for a funder, which they had never done before. Several speakers cancelled at the eleventh hour. In one case, she and other organizers arranged a remote-video presentation for a speaker in Australia who was no longer able to attend. "No matter how well prepared you are, you won't have all eventualities covered," she says, adding that the need to think quickly and to handle the unexpected makes conference organizing an excellent learning experience.

Conferences are professional-development opportunities in terms of both the information shared there and the organizing process itself, says Jodi, assistant director for educational research at the American Chemical Society. A conference is richer when its organizers are diverse, and Jodi says that early-career scientists are a key part of the scientific enterprise. She notes that such scientists often gravitate towards organizing symposia on cutting-edge topics and encourage more career and professional-development

sessions, as the organization's Younger Chemists Committee has done at past conferences.

Less-experienced volunteers might fear they do not have the skills or connections to organize a symposium. But Jodi says that volunteering is a safe place to hone existing skills and develop new ones. First-time organizers can seek advice on new tasks from more experienced colleagues in addition to enhancing their existing skills, such as improving fluency with abstract-submission software.

"A lot of symposium organizing is making it happen," says Jodi, and that could involve simply asking to be included.

As a graduate student in the Scott Polar Institute at Cambridge University, Allen volunteered as an organizer of a career-skills workshop sponsored by the UK Polar Network, a branch of the Association of Polar Early Career Scientists. With that and subsequent work for these organizations under his belt, he approached the cryosphere division of the American Geophysical Union (AGU), which focuses on Earth's frozen regions, to ask whether early-career scientists could help put sessions together. He ended up co-convening a session on mountain glaciers and their response to climate change at the AGU Fall Meeting in 2011.

As a first-timer, Allen learned the nuts and bolts of operating electronic session timers and using audio-visual equipment so that he could help speakers who were unfamiliar with the technology – and also so that he knew how to use them when his own talk came up. It was "much less daunting" when he knew he did not have to fumble with the equipment, says Allen, now a postdoctoral researcher at the National Snow & Ice Data Center in Colorado.

Praveena, a recent graduate of the master's programme in environmental monitoring and management at Nottingham University's Malaysia campus, has become immersed in conference organizing. As a full-time coordinator for the Society for Conservation Biology's biennial Asia Section meeting next August, her tasks include sorting incoming abstracts and registrations; seeking sponsorships to offset conference and speaker costs; coordinating workshops held before and after the conference; planning event food menus with caterers; and working with a web manager to update and maintain the conference website.

Praveena says that six months of conference organizing have provided an intensive dose of the soft skills that were tougher for her to pick up in her previous career as an engineer. And she has also widened her contact network to include people she has worked with locally and the hundreds of delegates and speakers who will arrive in Malaysia in a few weeks. "You have to speak to sponsors, you have to deal with government, you have to network with all these famous, world-renowned scientists," she says.

The organizing process itself can make this last step easier, giving a younger scientist the confidence to approach more experienced and highly celebrated researchers. "A lot of graduate students and early-career faculty feel that they're not worthy of talking to the 'big' people," says Josh, a conservation biologist in New York, and Erin's adviser. Connection to the conference or

society gives them a way into the circle that forms, sometimes literally, around renowned scientists, he says. "This title - symposium organiser - gives (other scientists) a reason to speak with them. It gives that e-mail the gravitas of the organization behind it."

Matt is an organic chemist in Detroit and chairs the board at the American Chemical Society that brings undergraduates and student organizers to meetings. He says that encouraging young scientists to get involved in conference organizing is important for senior researchers who are interested in training the next generation and keeping their fields alive, and that junior scientists need to develop skills beyond those taught in an academic setting, including leadership, communication, task delegation and people management. Organizing and managing conferences and their logistics is a way to develop and exercise these skills, he says. "Show me the other place in their training, not in the classroom or the lab, where they're getting that kind of instruction."

Questions 1–6

Look at the following statements (1-6) and the list of 7 people from the text (A-G). Which person might have said the following? (THERE IS ONE NAME YOU WILL NOT NEED TO USE)

1 "I wasn't always a conference organiser."

2 "I can meet people face-to-face at a conference."

3 "I felt much more confident about my presentation because I'd already learnt how to use the microphone and conference room screen."

4 "It is not enough just to have academic skills."

5 "If you have an official named role in the conference organisation team, it gives you a valid excuse to talk to important people."

6 "We found a way for someone to participate long-distance."

People

A Erin .....

B Anne-Marie .....

C Jodi .....

D Allen .....

E Praveena .....

F Josh .....

G Matt .....

Questions 7–8

There are a number of advantages to helping at a conference. Which TWO of the following (i-v) are NOT included in lines 1-39 of the text?.

i understanding how to time-manage an event;

ii increasing your academic contacts;

iii taking the place of an absent speaker;

iv improving your oral presentation skills;

v meeting a potential supervisor.

Questions 9–12

Complete the summary of information from lines 41-85. Choose between ONE TO FOUR WORDS FROM THE TEXT for each answer.

The subject matter of conferences organised by younger researchers is more likely to be **9** ..... In addition, they often favour inclusion of useful conference workshops on **10** .... Furthermore, when young scientists are the organisers, it is a real team effort, where the better prepared are usually happy to give **11** ..... to those with less experience. There are also aspects of conference planning that are totally unconnected to academic presentations, such as **12** .... Even scientists need to eat!

Questions 13–14

Based on information in the text, lines 87-110, are the following statements true or false? Choose from TRUE (T), FALSE (F), DOES NOT SAY (D/S).

13 Senior academics are usually not interested in communicating with junior scientists at conferences. .....

14 Distributing responsibilities is a skill junior scientists can learn when organising a conference. .....

— THIS IS THE END OF THE TEST —