

THE POWER OF CONFERENCES

RESEARCH SUMMARY



BUSINESS EVENTS
SYDNEY

This summary is based on the book
*The Power of Conferences:
stories of serendipity, innovation
and driving social change,*
authored by Associate Professor
Deborah Edwards, Associate Professor
Carmel Foley and Cheryl Malone from
the University of Technology Sydney.



[DOWNLOAD THE FULL BOOK](#)
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WHAT IS THE TRUE POWER OF CONFERENCES?

It's a question that can only really be answered years after the events have taken place, when ideas presented and connections made lead down the line to breakthroughs that save lives, change society or redefine best practice and policy.

Business Events Sydney's latest research collaboration with the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) explores the long-term impacts of conferences through the stories of 10 prominent Australians who are synonymous with such breakthroughs.

The Power of Conferences: stories of serendipity, innovation and driving social change demonstrates the vital role that conferences have played in some of the most significant global discoveries of the last 50 years.

Sometimes the most important and exciting legacies come from unexpected encounters. The ones that lead to unlikely collaborations or opportunities to take best practice from one field and apply it to a totally different area. Our new research includes examples of where this cross-fertilisation has helped to inspire new thinking and innovation.

At other times, genuine progress is made by bringing people with a common cause together and uniting them behind a clear and compelling purpose. Whether to accelerate a cure for disease, raise funding for a particular cause, or secure greater profile and support for a campaign to drive social change.

The research includes first-hand accounts of how conferences have successfully achieved all of these things. We hope the stories and individuals featured will inspire you to take the long view and think about how you can use your events to help create a lasting impact.





KEY INSIGHTS

Five themes appear repeatedly throughout the stories in the research. Collectively, they show just how vital conferences can be in terms of translating cutting-edge ideas and research into powerful outcomes that have major social and economic value for the global community.



Creating networks, collaborations, partnerships and support

As well as citing specific connections and collaborations that have been pivotal in their own work, interviewees highlighted the importance of widening their network, building friendships and finding other like-minded delegates who provided future support.

Discussion, debate, stimulation, ideas and innovation

The stories in this research reinforce that conferences often bring people with different perspectives together to debate key issues, which in turn generates new ideas and innovations.

Attracting funding, trade and investment

Research funding is highly competitive between individuals, research bodies and universities. However, the stories here demonstrate that conferences can provide access to funding sources and encourage investment.

Influencing public perceptions and policy and driving social change

Another common thread through the stories is the ability of conferences to influence a wider audience, and shift public and media perceptions.

Personal growth, knowledge and learning

By taking delegates away from every day distractions, conferences enable deeper, more focused learning. Attendees often also learn from others outside their own field, which can lead to fresh collaborations and new applications for their own work.

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Dr Pia Winberg was able to connect with economists, investors and business people outside of her field of research - connections that proved instrumental to the development of her plan to develop seaweed on a commercial basis.

Professor Bill Bowtell saw conferences become a focal point for all parties involved in the global effort to solve the AIDS crisis. This created an opportunity to explore a highly-complex problem from all sides and ultimately drive a change in global policy.

Professor Martin Green has secured international research funding by meeting and showcasing his team's work at international conferences, and by using conference contacts to demonstrate collaboration for funding applications.

Professor Ian Frazer found that media reports of research he presented at conferences encouraged the public to participate in vital clinical trials for his new HPV vaccine. While Professor Tom Calma believes conferences have been a key driver behind positive changes for Indigenous Australians.

Professor Brian Schmidt highlighted the importance of this learning and knowledge sharing in his story. He believes that without conferences his own field of astronomy would consist of several people working in isolation, without understanding what everyone else in the world is doing.

MARY BEBAWY

Understanding how cancer cells communicate

For a disease that touches so many lives, surprisingly little is known about how or why cancer patients relapse and how cancer cells themselves behave.

Associate Professor Mary Bebawy has spent over 20 years trying to change that, and has unlocked some of the disease's most potent secrets.

During her career, Bebawy has been inspired by cutting-edge unpublished research at conferences, and has also used these events to share her and her team's groundbreaking work with thousands of scientists, researchers and practitioners. The team's findings have challenged conventional thinking about how and why cancer patients relapse.

The work Bebawy and her team have done in this area is set to significantly improve the quality of care and recovery of cancer patients, and has the potential to save millions of lives.

"You have to go to conferences to be one step ahead in your thinking and in the development of your thoughts."



Mary Bebawy is Associate Professor in Pharmacy at the University of Technology, Sydney.

PIA WINBERG

Venus Shell Systems, a marine biomass farm

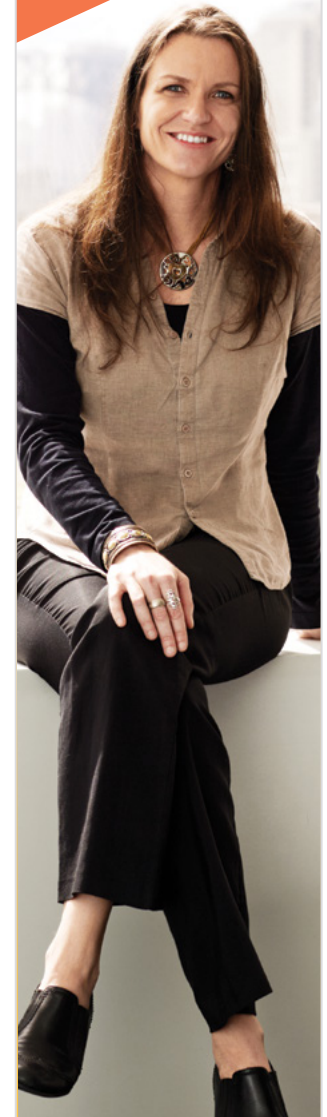
With 800 million people worldwide suffering from chronic malnourishment and three million children under five dying each year from poor nutrition, one of our greatest challenges for the future will be finding ways to feed ourselves without compromising the environment and its resources.

Dr Pia Winberg believes seaweed has the potential to help tackle this global problem by providing a sustainable and nutritious food source.

She was so confident in the potential of this superfood that she decided to move away from full-time academia to establish a pilot seaweed production facility, Venus Shell Systems - using conferences to secure the support and funding she needed.

Although it's still early days, there are positive signs that Winberg's work will make a significant contribution towards providing a sustainable food source of the future.

“Conferences are just so important on so many levels, particularly as part of a long-term strategy for getting public funding.”



Pia Winberg is Founder, Director and Chief Scientist of Venus Shell Systems, and an Honorary Fellow of the School of Medicine at the University of Wollongong. She is also a Business Events Sydney Ambassador.



BILL BOWTELL

Overcoming HIV/AIDS

During the 1980s there was no bigger global health crisis than the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Bill Bowtell AO tells a powerful story about how the international (and national) AIDS conferences played a vital role in tackling the epidemic, by bringing together the different stakeholder groups - all with very different perspectives on what was needed.

The conferences were attended by academics, scientists and doctors, with the patients and high-risk populations, media and policy makers. Only when this clash of 'ideas' versus 'implementation' took place, could solutions be developed and outcomes realised.

As the world grapples with new threats from viruses like Ebola and Zika, Bowtell believes that the world will again turn to conferences to find the solutions we need.

“The AIDS conferences became the driving force behind massive changes in international and national policy that led to many people receiving treatment who otherwise would have died.”



Bill Bowtell AO is Executive Director of Pacific Friends of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. He is also a Business Events Sydney Ambassador.

IAN FRAZER

Development of the HPV cervical cancer vaccine

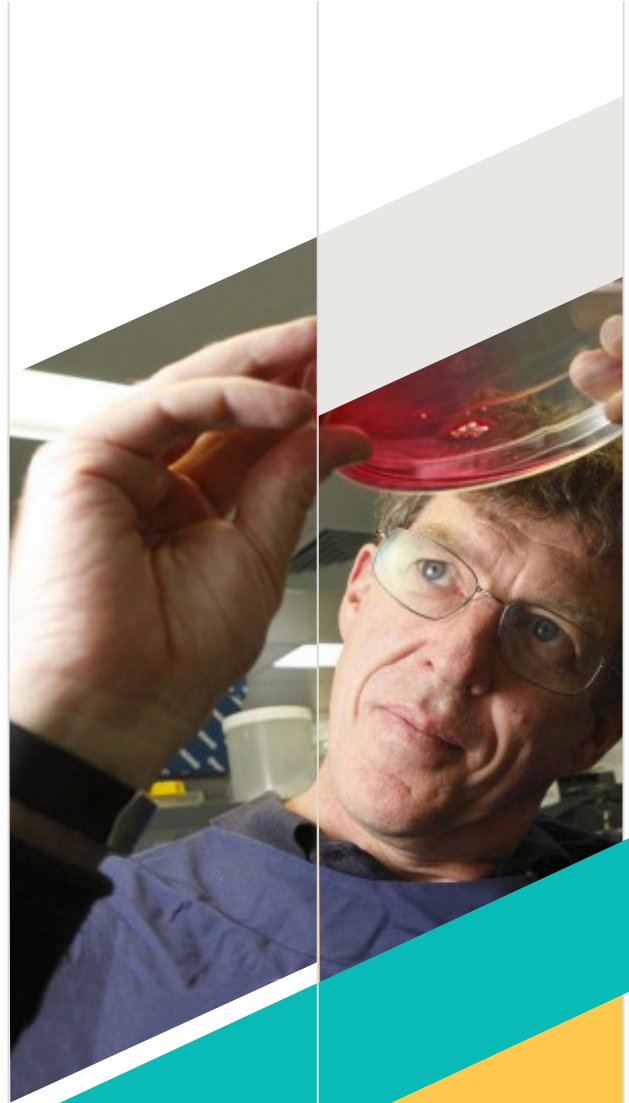
Human Papillomavirus (HPV) comes in over 100 forms and is a major cause of cervical and other types of cancer.

In 2006, clinical immunologist Professor Ian Frazer AC led the team that discovered a vaccine to prevent HPV, which has since saved millions of women from contracting the virus. It was a series of collaborations, first initiated at a conference in 1982, that set him on the path to that vital discovery.

An ardent fan of conferences, Frazer has used them as an invaluable platform for driving research forward and identifying collaborations that will accelerate the process.

Frazer and his team are now searching for ways to prevent people who have already contracted the virus from going on to develop cancers.

“The connections that came through the conferences were very real ... and many of the collaborations I have in the field of immunology have arisen from people I’ve met at conferences.”



Ian Frazer AC is a Professor within the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Queensland.

MARTIN GREEN

The father of photovoltaics

For over 30 years, Professor Martin Green AM has led the way in the race to capture the sun's energy and convert it into electricity.

Since creating their first solar cell in 1975, Green and his team at the University of New South Wales have been on a journey that initially saw them outpace NASA and COMSAT in the race to create a cell with 20% efficiency, and then go onto break record after record.

Conferences have been integral to Green's achievements in terms of providing inspiration and ideas, building networks, and securing funding.

Thanks to Green and his team, Sydney is already an educational hub for photovoltaic technology within Asia-Pacific. It now has the potential to play a significant role in solving one of the biggest global problems we face today: climate change.

"It's inspiring to meet with like-minded people who are working in the same areas, and it helps to keep everyone interested."



Martin Green AM is Scientia Professor in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of New South Wales.

TOM CALMA

Advancing rights for Indigenous Australians

Professor Tom Calma AO has a reputation as a leading Indigenous scholar who has worked tirelessly for over 40 years to advance living standards for Australia's Indigenous people.

Conferences have always been at the heart of Calma's work, and he believes they have played a huge part in raising awareness and gathering momentum for change. That began with the Aboriginal Education Conferences of the 1980s and 1990s, which created an opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds to talk about the issues that mattered.

Calma was heavily involved in those conferences and believes they became one of the key drivers of the social and political shifts that have occurred for Indigenous Australians over the past 40 years.

As Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, Calma continues to fight for a reconciled, just and equitable Australia.

“Conferences are a great venue to advance reconciliation and develop greater social, cultural and political understandings of Australia's Indigenous populations.”



Professor Tom Calma AO is Chancellor of the University of Canberra and Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia.



BARRY MARSHALL

Treating stomach ulcers

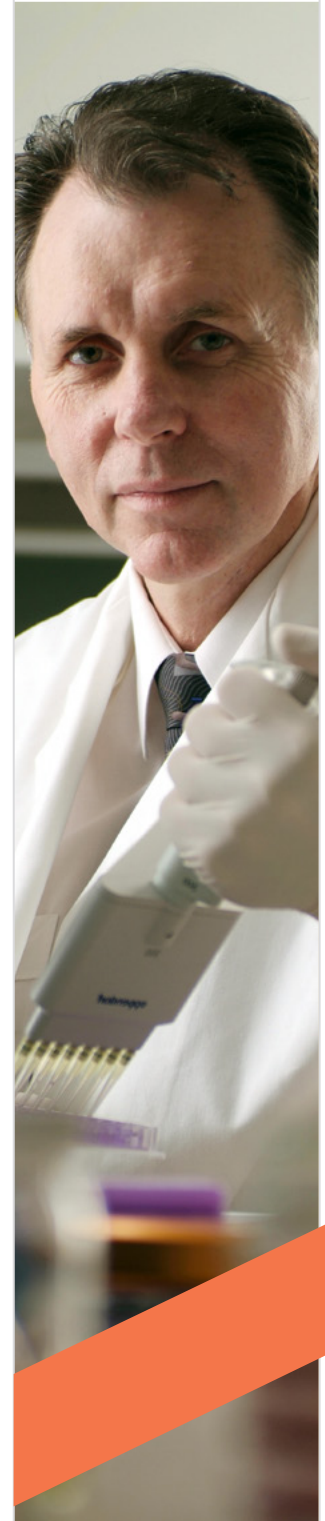
When Professor Barry Marshall AC discovered that the real cause of peptic ulcers was bacteria, he was widely denounced by the bulk of the medical community and global pharmaceutical giants.

Rather than giving up, Marshall used conferences as a platform to continue presenting his research and making an increasingly compelling case for his claims. Eventually, the controversy, interest and support generated by the conferences won over the doubters and they accepted Marshall's findings.

The outcome has been the development of the simple, cost-effective diagnostic tests and treatments that have eliminated the discomfort of the millions who develop peptic ulcers each year.

Following a host of honours, Marshall and his collaborator Robin Warren were finally awarded the Nobel Prize for the discovery in 2005.

“Conferences give you access to material that’s not going to be published for a year or two, so if you don’t go to a conference at least once every two years you become out of touch and your ideas could be superseded.”



Barry Marshall AC is Professor of Clinical Microbiology at the University of Western Australia.

IAN CHUBB

Advancing scientific education

During his five years as Australia's Chief Scientist, Professor Ian Chubb AC attended and presented at more than 100 conferences every year.

Chubb used these opportunities to make sure that educators, policy-makers and the public were made aware of the big issues in science, and just how important these were to the nation's health and people's quality of life. From the decline in students choosing STEM subjects, to the contribution science can make to climate change.

Over that time he has seen a far greater focus on business at conferences, with contemporary scientists encouraged to go out and innovate and to think of ideas to commercialise.

“Business is a big part of the conference audience now, whereas in my day if you had business involved it was to sponsor the morning tea. It was a different attitude, the world's different.”



Professor Ian Chubb AC was Chief Scientist of Australia from 2011 to 2016.



BRIAN SCHMIDT

Proving that the universe is speeding up

The work of Nobel Laureate Brian Schmidt AC has radically reshaped our understanding of how the universe functions and where it may be headed.

Schmidt and his fellow researchers challenged and disproved one of the most basic assumptions within astronomy - that the universe is expanding at a decreasing rate. In fact, they discovered, that rate continues to speed up.

According to National Geographic, Schmidt's revelation was perhaps the most important scientific discovery of the last quarter of the 20th century - and one for which the astrophysicist won the Nobel Prize in Physics.

Schmidt says the personal relationships he made at conferences played a fundamental role in the discovery, and says that only conferences can provide those essential interactions. He believes they are the only place where astronomers find out the latest developments in astronomy.

“Astronomy without conferences would mean a bunch of people working on things without understanding what everyone else in the world was working on.”



Brian Schmidt AC is Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University.

LINDA BURNEY

Indigenous educational reform

Australia's first Indigenous MP, The Hon. Linda Burney used the adversity she faced in her own life as the inspiration to bring about positive change in terms of how Indigenous people are treated and perceived in Australian society.

Burney believes that conferences have been critical in achieving those goals, by bringing together Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people, with a range of perspectives, to establish common goals and set a clear agenda for change.

The highlight for Burney was the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention, which brought 2,000 people together to set the direction for the future of the reconciliation process.

Despite advances in technologies and communications, Burney believes that well-organised and resourced conferences with a clear purpose will continue to be one of the most important tools available to those seeking to bring about social change.

“It was the way the conferences brought everyone together to establish common goals that helped us achieve the level of success which we did.”



Linda Burney is the Honourable Member of the Australian Parliament for Barton.

WANT THE WHOLE STORY?

Go to the [UTS ePress website](#) and download the full version of *The Power of Conferences: stories of serendipity, innovation and driving social change*. It features these 10 stories in full, detailed insights that came out of the research, and a wealth of recommendations for further reading and supplementary research.



READ OUR PREVIOUS RESEARCH

You can also access the previous research reports from Business Events Sydney and UTS on the [Business Events Sydney website](#).



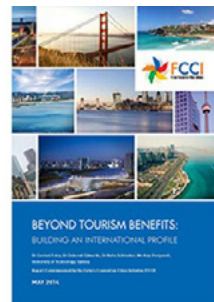
***Conferences:
catalysts
for thriving
economies***



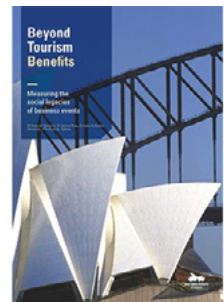
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expenditure and
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expenditure
attributed to
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held in NSW***



***FCCI - beyond
tourism benefits
- building an
international
profile***



***Beyond tourism
benefits***

HOW CAN WE HELP?

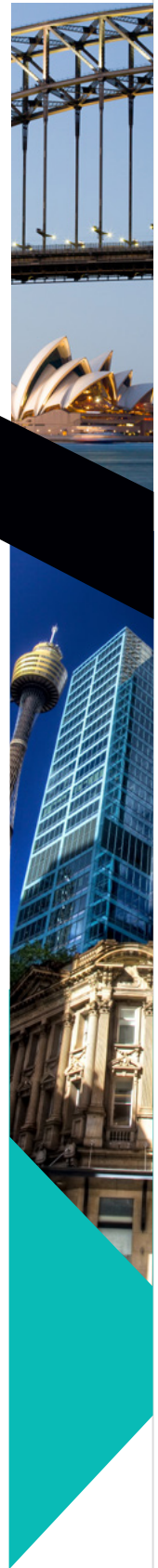
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We can help you take the long view for your event, and explore what success looks like for your organisation 10 years down the line, working with you to create a bid built around that ambition.

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