International Union of Physiological Sciences Physiology Teaching Workshop, March 31–April 1, 2012, Arabian Gulf University, Kingdom of Bahrain

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Subhan MM. International Union of Physiological Sciences Physiology Teaching Workshop, March 31–April 1, 2012, Arabian Gulf University, Kingdom of Bahrain. Adv Physiol Educ 37: 119–122, 2013; doi:10.1152/advan.00168.2012.—Since 2009, the Department of Physiology had planned an International Union of Physiological Sciences Physiology Teaching Workshop at Arabian Gulf University. The date was set for March 5–6, 2011; however, due to civil unrest, the workshop was postponed to March 31–April 1, 2012. The workshop was a success, bringing together 92 speakers and participants from 23 countries. Twenty-eight participants from economically disadvantaged countries were given travel support. The workshop included plenary lectures, breakout workshops, poster sessions, dinners, and a social trip. On April 2, 2012, an AD Instruments satellite workshop on data-acquisition systems for laboratory teaching was held, with 60 participants from 12 countries.

AT THE INTERNATIONAL UNION OF PHYSIOLOGICAL SCIENCES (IUPS) Teaching Workshop at Kobe, Japan, in August 2009, the need to conduct an IUPS Teaching Workshop for the Middle East was identified. Arabian Gulf University (AGU), Bahrain, was the suggested venue. AGU is a regional university established nearly three decades ago by the six nations that comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. AGU was an ideal location to organize this workshop as it has world-class facilities, experience in organizing international meetings, and faculty interested in innovation in education. The College of Medicine and Medical Sciences (CMMS) adopted a problem-based learning curriculum at its inception and has provided an educational leadership role for the region. The CMMS is also a recognized World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Educational Development and Training. Bahrain offers a venue where international travelers can enjoy the cultural diversity of the Middle East and also avail of visa waiver programs for several nationalities. It has a bridge connecting it to the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia as well as an international airport and enjoys a central geographic position in the Middle East.

The primary reason for holding a physiology teaching workshop in the Middle East was that none had previously been planned or conducted there. Second, there has been a 400% growth of Departments of Physiology in the GCC region over the last two decades. This growth is primarily due to the increase in the number of universities teaching medicine and allied health sciences (dentistry and pharmacy). Twenty years ago, only eight medical colleges were present in the GCC; however, now there are twenty-nine colleges (Table 1). Finally, several nearby countries have been devastated by wars or civil strife, e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen. These countries need rebuilding and retraining, but to hold a workshop in these countries would have been difficult for security and logistical reasons.

The Workshop

The date was initially set for March 5–6, 2011. The Arab Spring, affecting over 21 Arab nations, started in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, and this wave eventually hit Bahrain on February 14, 2011, resulting in civil unrest (5). Therefore, the workshop was postponed to March 31–April 1, 2012. This situation presented unique problems and ultimately impacted attendance both directly and indirectly. The direct impact included a participant from Libya, who was sponsored by the Libyan Ministry of Health. On the day of her travel, there were some skirmishes near Benghazi airport, and she missed her flight. Another situation involved 19 Iraqi physiologists who had registered, but due to the unrest, no Iraqis were granted visas. An indirect consequence was that 10–15 participants who had registered and paid did not attend. Although we do not know the reason(s) for this, we suspected that many of them were fearful of coming to Bahrain. This might have been especially so for participants from Saudi Arabia, as during the unrest in 2011, Saudi troops entered Bahrain at the request of the Bahraini government (5), and some Saudis might have feared a backlash.

We narrate these stories to show the difficulties that some of our participants experienced in attempting to attend a regional physiology teaching workshop.

Another difficulty related to participation in this region is that most academic institutions provide one conference trip as part of the contract of teaching faculty. This normally includes registration, accommodation, and airfare. Most academics prefer to go to conferences in North America, Europe, or Australasia to present their data, for several reasons. Some institutions do allow two trips in a year, one overseas and another local/regional. If more institutions followed with the latter model, attendance for meetings in this region would greatly increase.

The workshop eventually brought together 87 participants and 5 invited speakers from 23 countries. Twenty-nine participants from thirteen economically disadvantaged countries were given travel support (15 men and 14 women). Preference was given to faculty members teaching physiology, under 45 yr of age, and not paid did not attend. Although we do not know the reason(s) for this, we suspected that many of them were fearful of coming to Bahrain. This might have been especially so for participants from Saudi Arabia, as during the unrest in 2011, Saudi troops entered Bahrain at the request of the Bahraini government (5), and some Saudis might have feared a backlash.

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goals and objectives

The main goal of the workshop was to train physiology faculty members to develop better skills in teaching medical students, which, in the long term, will improve the clinical competence of doctors and also the quality of medical care in the region. The objectives of this workshop were to:

A. Provide a platform to discuss problems unique to the Middle East related to teaching basic sciences and to find their solutions
B. Create a sustainable collaboration between physiologists and basic scientists in the region for research on teaching and learning
C. Train physiologists and basic scientists in new teaching strategies
D. Determine strategies that would encourage students, physicians, and scientists to pursue a teaching career in basic sciences
E. Strengthen the participants’ abilities to develop and evaluate curricula, teachers, and students

Of these objectives, the author believes that objectives A, C, and E were achieved and objective B was partially achieved, whereas objective D was not achieved.

The invited speakers were Robert Carroll (United States), Penny Hansen (Canada), Susan Higgins-Opitz (South Africa), Osamu Matsuo (Japan), and Dee Silverthorn (United States). All of these speakers, except for S. Higgins-Opitz, are members of the IUPS Education Committee. Plenary lectures, breakout workshops, poster sessions, dinners, and a social trip to the Bahrain National Museum were included in the workshop program. Social and entertainment activities were organized by a students’ committee. There were 21 workshop facilitators from 10 countries on 5 continents (Table 2). They conducted 25 parallel small group workshops during 4 break-out sessions over the 2-day workshop, during which ~15 posters related to education were on display. Of these 25 parallel workshops, 7 workshops were on the curriculum, 5 workshops on teaching and/or learning, 4 workshops on assessment, 3 workshops on practical laboratories, 5 workshops on interactive teaching/use of information technology, and 1 workshop on workshop organization. On April 2, 2012, an AD Instruments satellite workshop on data-acquisition systems for laboratory teaching was held with 60 participants from 12 countries. There was no registration fee for this workshop.

Comments and Self-Appraisal

With regard to organizing the IUPS workshop, the biggest issue was, by far, the absence of a physiology society in the region and the difficulty of starting a new society under the prevailing political situation. Therefore, we first had to assemble an organizing committee. This had 10 members and 5 coopted members. Our first meeting was held on January 13, 2010, and this committee met a total of eight occasions. The committee had to start from scratch with contacting participants and sponsors. Secondary to this, AGU did not have a dedicated meetings/event manager, so the organizing committee members were involved in arranging visas, air tickets, and hotel accommodation, helping to set up the website, and dealing with printers to print bags, brochures, programs, and a workshop booklet. After identifying the speakers, we embarked on a plan to find our participants. Although we had a wide circle of possible participants, our main aim was regional. A separate program committee, consisting of seven members and two coopted members, conducted a needs assessment using an online questionnaire in April 2010. The purpose was to find out...
what topics people would be interested in; this would also advertise our workshop. Using previous e-mail contacts, we emailed ~150 colleagues who were teaching basic sciences (primarily physiology) in the region. Of these, 72 colleagues (from 14 countries) replied to the online questionnaire. All were very positive and excited about holding a regional physiology teaching workshop. As this survey was anonymous, we could not identify those who actually participated in the workshop among those who responded to the survey, but participants did come from 8 countries of the 14 countries of the respondents.

Participant feedback via an anonymous paper questionnaire at the end of the workshop was extremely positive. This questionnaire consisted of a comments section and also nine parameters that participants evaluated using a five-point Likert scale; 60 forms were collected. Most comments concerned the knowledge that participants obtained, the networking between speakers and participants, the interactive experience that participants had, the good hospitality, and organization of the workshop. Feedback also came in the form of e-mails and SMS text messages after the workshop. In total, participants’ comments from their feedback questionnaire and e-mails/SMS came to 11 pages in length. The following three e-mails/SMS describe the workshop’s success:

Marvelous learning experience due to excellent organization, outstanding quality, terrific presenters, superb hosts, fabulous food. Bless u all. [Saudi Arabia]

Thank you for organizing an amazing conference. This was the first international conference I have attended and as a novice in academia, I found it a stimulating, fruitful and an inspiring experience. Despite the limited resources available, you have managed to deliver an educational event that has brought together experts from all corners of the globe, which I feel has had a substantial impact on the success of this event. This is a positive reflection on the cohesiveness of the department and academic staff of physiology, an example for which one would hope to emulate. Your efforts are much appreciated. [Bahrain]

First of all congratulations for the excellent organization of the conference. I was really impressed by your outstanding communication and organization skills. You have no idea how the conference changed my view about teaching physiology; it has made it more easy and entertaining than before. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to attend and share ideas and experiences from all over the world, and for sure this will make me a better teacher and physiologist. Thank you again for all what you have done for me. I hope we will meet again and keep in touch. [Sudan]

In terms of the strengths and weaknesses/limitations of the workshop, data analysis of the nine parameters from the feedback questionnaire showed that the participants were satisfied with all aspects of the workshop (Table 3). The three highest parameters rated were the room atmosphere (4.64), organization (4.61), and physical environment (4.53). The three lowest were, jointly, knowledge expertise and food (both 4.24) and the accommodation (4.14).

Of course there were weaknesses and limitations, which we have listed below under four headings: general issues, organizational, and lecturing/technical issues.

**General issues.** A full-time administrative staff/secretary was needed for the workshop, and many issues might have been solved if one was made available. With regard to this point, AGU should have a dedicated “event manager or team” for such events.

Visas for 1 participant from Sri Lanka, 1 participant from Yemen, and 19 participants from Iraq were rejected. This was unfortunately beyond our control.

**Organizational.** Parallel workshop session information should have been passed on to participants 1 wk before the workshop began so that they could choose the workshop of their liking. Since this was not possible, on day 1, 30–40 participants crammed into 1 workshop (even though they were told it was full), whereas other workshops had only 6 or 7 participants. This problem only occurred once.

**Lecturing/technical issues.** In one parallel workshop room, the projector remote was located after 10 min; in another room, the computers-multimedia/internet connections took time to set up, and only one information technology expert was available, which caused a few workshops to be delayed on day 1 only.

**Hotel issues.** The conference hotel broke its agreement to provide pick up and drop off from the hotel to the airport at the last minute; the hotel gave the excuse that their van was in the garage. There were too many people arriving on Friday, March 30, at the airport (up to 50 persons), and this was too much for the hotel to handle, but AGU staff did a great job to accommodate these difficulties.

Photographs of the workshop have been uploaded onto the following two websites: http://iupsworkshopinbahrain2012.shutterly.com/ and https://www.dropbox.com/gallery/41993847/1/IUPS%20Bahrain?h=f4bf4f.

**Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

The organizing committee learned that it takes more than 1 yr of planning (ideally 18 mo) to successfully organize a teaching workshop. Academic institutions wanting to run similar workshops or meetings need dedicated staff for such purposes or they should arrange for an event organizing firm, if they can afford it. The procurement of these kinds of services should result in the smooth running of the events, without the additional problem of disrupting teaching and other academic pursuits. We found that heavy involvement in planning interferes with research and publishing and can delay career progress. We recommend that organizing workshops or meetings should be included in the criteria for promotion, perhaps being made equivalent to publishing one or two scientific papers. We also felt that AGU should hold similar workshops more often, at least once every 3 yr. These
could involve scientific research along with education and include all the basic sciences. If workshops were organized with the help of other departments, we believe that they would be even more successful and beneficial to the host institution. Physiologists and other faculty members should be able to expect support from their institutions so that they can participate in similar regional and international teaching workshops.

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DISCLOSURES

No conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, are declared by the author(s).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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REFERENCES