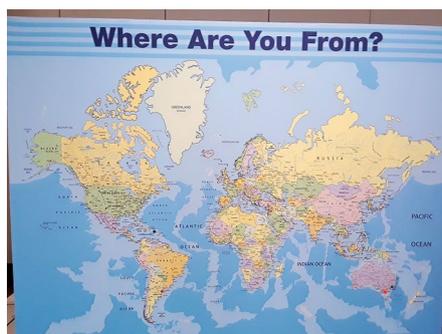


All together now

A return to in-person and hybrid conferences is more than welcome and sure to inspire.

Spring has sprung in the Northern Hemisphere and in-person conferences have been revived across the United States, Europe and parts of Asia. They are not the same as before. While an eager crowd of physicists, young and old, made their way to Chicago for the recent American Physical Society (APS) March Meeting, the in-person attendance was only about 70% of pre-COVID-19, with 8,000 in-person and 5,500 virtual participants. All the same, the international flavour of scientific research was on clear display on the map outside the exhibit hall where participants could pin their lab location/hometown (see image). Not all in-person participants desire the full human immersion, reasonable accommodations are made by participants choosing colours for their lanyards indicating their level of comfort: green — go ahead, shake my hand! Red — watch your step, buddy!

This new normal presses conference organizers to decide at an early stage whether they want a fully in-person conference or to offer a hybrid option — combining in-person and remote presentations and/or attendance. For hybrid conferences, more transparency is much needed: conference organizers should indicate on the posted programme whether enlisted speakers plan to attend in-person or remotely. The APS March Meeting organizers chose to allow invited speakers the option to present their talk remotely: we observed this sometimes went very smoothly with an impressive level of discourse between the in-person attendees and the remote speaker facilitated through the usual microphones in the aisles; people's comfort level with such communication channels may indeed have increased during their enforced isolation. However, we also noticed that technical glitches (WiFi, connecting with remote speakers) prevented some sessions from running smoothly, and



Researchers from the Caribbean, South America, Europe, Africa and Australia were the first to pin their stickers on the world map on Thursday morning 17 March 22 at the APS March Meeting in Chicago.

having enough time for questions. Large conferences, for example the APS March Meeting and the recent American Chemical Society Spring Meeting in San Diego, have adopted a hybrid approach, allowing attendees and some speakers to choose between the buzz of in-person exchange and the accessibility of remote participation. On the other hand, smaller, more intimate settings such as the Gordon Research Conferences (<https://www.grc.org/>) and some Nature Conferences (<https://go.nature.com/3JJLZ3n>) only plan to proceed if full in-person attendance is possible.

A lively atmosphere was on display at the exhibit hall of the McCormick Place Convention Center, an outlet difficult to replicate remotely, from exhibitors pushing their government's new quantum initiatives to shrewd academics building their industry connections and poster presenters discussing their latest results. Overheard at the APS March Meeting were the healthy anxieties of first-timer presenters: I could have responded better to that question! Certainly, those eager

enough to stick around for the Thursday evening Kavli symposium (many were) did not display anxiety in questioning the Nobel Prize-winner Klaus von Klitzing on future definitions of the SI base units.

The cultural and economic footprint of in-person conferences should not be overlooked. Only good can emerge from scientific folks from all over the world choosing to immerse themselves in Chicago blues, enjoying lunch dates over deep-dish pizza or cheering for the Blackhawks. The McCormick Place Convention Center, at 2.6 million square feet the largest convention centre in North America, can be difficult to navigate, but staff were more than willing to guide participants around this massive arena. It is also a major employer in the area, while lodging and dining at neighbouring hotels and restaurants provided much-needed custom for these industries.

We've come a long way from when COVID-19 was just arriving on US shores, forcing the abrupt cancellation of the APS March Meeting in Denver (D. Castelvecchi *Nature* <https://doi.org/ggq8v3>; 2020). Developing hybrid platforms to replicate the buzz of a large meeting or the community feel of a topical workshop is certainly a welcome addition to our post-COVID-19 world (*Nat. Phys.* **17**, 287; 2021), particularly for those with caring responsibilities. Having said that, ultimately, meeting people to exchange ideas and initiate collaborations is the reason why researchers and scientists travel rather than stay in their offices and labs. *Nature Materials's* editors are thrilled to be on the conference circuit again and are committed to engaging directly and extensively with the scientific community all over the world for years to come. Let's care for these forums together. □

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